

## Kantian Ethics



### Key words:

Moral law: binding moral obligations

Maxims: another word for moral rules, determined by reason

Duty: duties are created by the moral law, to follow it is our duty. The word deontological means duty –based

Summum bonum: the highest, most supreme good

Good will: a person of good will is a person who makes decisions according to the moral law

Categorical imperative: an unconditional moral obligation that is always binding irrespective of a person's inclination or purpose

Hypothetical imperative: a moral obligation that applies only if one desires the implied goal

Kingdom of ends: an imagined future in which all people act in accordance to the moral law, the categorical imperative

A Posteriori: knowledge gained through empirical evidence

Empirical evidence: gained through our five senses

A priori: knowledge gained without experience

Analytic statement: In an analytic statement the words in the statement will verify if the statement is true or false. A predicate is part of a sentence. In an analytic statement the predicate will say something necessarily true (or false) of the subject of the sentence.

Synthetic sentence: A synthetic statement requires further external information to verify if it is true or false. The evidence will normally be empirical- using our five senses.

Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Deontological ethical theories: concerned solely with an action rather than the consequence. We decide if something is right or wrong based on the action taken. Moral value is conferred by the virtue of the actions in themselves. If a certain act is wrong, then it is always wrong. Making deontological theories objective and absolute.

Kant's ethical theory is deontological. The right or wrongness of an action is based on the action, not the consequence. *For example, if a murderer knocked on the door as asked if your friend was in (and they are) you must tell the truth, even if it means the murderer will kill your friend. The act of telling a lie is wrong.*



Kant continued...

### The Moral Law



Kant was a rationalist: reason is the means by which we ought to analyse the world.

There is an objective moral law, this means that moral laws exist, independent of individual viewpoints. These laws are binding/ they stand no matter what.

Moral statements are "A priori synthetic".

A priori: moral knowledge is gained by pure reason, not by sense experience.

Synthetic: moral statements can be right or wrong.

Ethical statements are a priori synthetic because they are knowable through pure reason, but may or may not be true. You use your reason to work out if it is right or wrong.

### Duty and Good Will

- Highest form of good= Good Will. To have good will is to do one's duty. To act out of duty is to perform actions that are morally obligatory and not to perform those that are forbidden. Do the good, avoid the bad. We perform our duty because it is our duty.
- We do not perform a duty for a good consequence, we do it for the duty itself. Duty is good in itself. We should not act based on our emotions or out of self-interest. *For example, you help an old lady over the road out of kindness. This is not a moral action. It was motivated by kindness not duty.*
- Kant did acknowledge that happiness is good. Yet, the highest good is Good Will- which is performing your duty. Happiness can be seen as a reward for doing our duty, but not as the motivation. (Or the theory would teleological).
- Doing your duty is in itself a good thing, regardless of the consequences. Fulfilling our duty is not a stepping stone to a morally good consequence, but is good in itself.



### Key quotes

"Good will shine forth like a precious jewel"

"It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as a good thing without qualification, except good will."

All moral people must be rational beings.

All people capable of reason have the duty to perform morally.

For Kant if I am to act morally then I must be capable of exercising freedom or autonomy of the will. You cannot be moral unless you have freedom. We know we are free because we experience moral choice.

### SUMMUM BONUM (You can also look at Moral Argument)

- Kant referred to the highest good as the Summum Bonum.
- The best possible good comprising of virtue and happiness
- In Kant's famous argument OUGHT implies CAN: an obligation to do something implies the possibility that the goal can be achieved, otherwise there can be no obligation. It has to be possible
- However, while humans can achieve virtue, it is clearly outside their power to ensure that virtue is rewarded or coincides with happiness.
- Thus there is a need to postulate the existence of God as the one who has the power to bring virtue and happiness into harmony. Such proportioning clearly does not take place before death, so Kant also argued that there must be survival after death.



### Categorical and hypothetical imperatives

Imperatives = something which must be done

"All imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically... if the action would be good simply as a means to something else, then the imperative is hypothetical; but if the action is represented as good in itself... then the imperative is categorical."

Hypothetical imperative= a command that is conditional on personal desire or motive. It informs us of a factual relation between a goal and how to achieve it. There is no concept of obligation attached to it and Kant didn't see any moral reference in there.

Hypothetical imperatives will always begin with an 'if'. *If you want X you must do Y. If you want to lose weight then you must diet.*

A Categorical imperative tells us what we ought to do. A categorical imperative helps us know which actions are obligatory and which are forbidden. The actions which are obligatory will always be obligatory. Those which are forbidden will always be forbidden.

Kant argued that morality is prescriptive and moral statements are categorical in that they prescribe actions irrespective of the result. They are moral obligations. Once you are aware of a moral requirement your awareness is reason enough to take action.

## Kantian Ethics

### Categorical imperative

Maxims: moral principles, subjective in nature, which demand practical application. *For example: do not lie.*

But how do we know if a moral maxim should be accepted as a universal moral law?

The categorical imperative has three principles or three tests which help us show if a moral maxim should be a universal law (a moral law followed in ALL situations).

#### 1. Universal Law.

#### 2. Treat humans as ends not as 'means to an end'

#### 3. The Kingdom of Ends

### Universal law

The only actions that are moral are those that can be universalised – applied in all situations and to all rational beings, without exception. If something is wrong for one person it is wrong for everyone. *For example: you state it is wrong to steal, yet you can't afford your rent so it's okay for you. This is not acceptable. You can't have one rule for you and another for someone else.* One rule for everyone.



"Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should be universal law."

### So why NO exceptions?

- All exceptions will cause harm to someone or have a damaging effect on society, according to Kant. *For example: a lie always harms someone. If not the liar, then society. If everyone was to think it was acceptable to lie society would become intolerable and untrustworthy.*

"For an action to be morally valid, the agent- or person performing the act- must not carry out the action unless he or she believes that, in the same situation, all people should act the same way".



### Treat humans as ends not as 'means to an end'

- Kant held human beings as the pinnacle of creation. Therefore, it can never be moral to exploit people, to use them as a means to an end.
- Each person is unique and of equal value so cannot be sacrificed, even if it would result in some overall greater good.
- For example: some people may argue that killing one person to save many lives is acceptable. But this is treating this individual simply as a means to an end- a way of achieving a goal. It completely disregards the rights of this person as a unique individual. Therefore, Kant would say it is FORBIDDEN.*
- You could give the example of the prisoners and prison guard.

"So act that you treat humanity, both in your own person and in the person of every other human being, never merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end".



### The Kingdom of Ends

- Kant argued that our actions had to be based on the assumption that others would also act morally and treat everyone as ends, not means.
- If you were making the law and it could not be applied in world in which we all treated one another as ends, then you cannot make it an objective moral law.
- Imagine you are put on an island with 5 other people. You sit down to establish some Island rules. As you discuss ideas you will realise you have similar suggestions. People want to live morally, rather than immorally.*
- Kant knew to realise a reality of everyone pursuing the moral and avoiding the immoral was almost impossible. However, he maintained that it must be attempted.

"So act as if you were through your maxim a law-making member of a Kingdom of Ends."

In the exam, after explaining the three tests of the Categorical Imperative you can apply all three to the example above to show why Kant would deem this to be wrong – expanding on the following points.

- 1) You would not ALWAYS bomb civilians, not everyone would do this in all situations.  

- 2) You are treating humans as means to an end.
- 3) In a moral society, where we don't treat people as means to an end, most people would decide this is wrong.

*Example:* During the Second World War, the Allies pursued a policy of bombing civilian targets, in the hope that the Axis powers would be weakened by loss of morale.

### Evaluating Kant – Strengths

- ✓ Deontology gives a powerful set of moral principles: it is absolute, clear and simple.
- ✓ The moral value of an action comes from the intrinsic rightness of an action- it prevents actions which are inherently wrong.
- ✓ Deontology rejects a teleological approach- the possible and future consequences of an action which are beyond our control. It makes decisions quick!
- ✓ Justice is always an absolute, even if the majority does not benefit. It is therefore impartial and unaffected by social factors or pressures.
- ✓ It recognises moral absolutes which do not change with time or culture.
- ✓ Kant emphasises the need for reason in his ethics. He regards human beings as rational beings who should use their reason to determine moral law. It is therefore impartial because it has a rational basis. It is not effected by emotion. It is fairer.
- ✓ The formula/ principle of the end in itself enshrines the humanitarian principle by which all people are regarded as of equal value and worthy of protection.
- ✓ Kant's theory gives humans intrinsic worth as rational beings, the high point of creation, superior to animals.

### Evaluating Kant – Weaknesses

- ✓ Deontological theories have been criticised because they make moral obligation appear arbitrary or inexplicable except by reference to duty. There are in fact many other factors which influence our decision making.
- ✓ It can be impractical: There are sometimes circumstances when it may be necessary to sacrifice the good of a few for the good of the many
- ✓ JS MILL states the theory is incomplete as it does not tell us what to do when our duties conflict. The murderer at the door- it is more important to tell the truth or save a life? Kant gives no advice.
- ✓ W D ROSS states we have Prima Facie Duties. These are duties towards people such as family and friends. They take priority over our duties to strangers. We cannot help this bias we feel. This suggests we cannot be impartial and ignore emotions like Kant wanted us too.
- ✓ Kant said for an imperative to be categorical (and therefore a moral statement) it needs to be able to be universalised. However, if the principle of universality is taken to its logical extreme it becomes a *reductio ad absurdum* – the argument become ridiculous. Anything could be universalised, but it does NOT make it a moral statement.
- ✓ The principle of universality is weak because there may be a problem caused by different but similar moral dilemmas. Are any two moral dilemmas the same?
- ✓ The naturalistic fallacy: the is-ought gap. Kant argued that we ought to do what is good to do, that what is inherently good and intrinsically right is the way in which we ought to behave for the mutual good of all regardless of the consequences. Eg. If we say it is good to be kind to children, then we ought to be kind to children. Critics of Kant call this the naturalistic fallacy of turning is into ought. If we say something is the case, then that is a descriptive statement. If we say something ought to be the case then that is a prescriptive statement. David Hume (1711-1776), observed that there is nothing in a descriptive statement which allows us to proceed from what people actually do, to making a rule which states what people ought to do.
- ✓ Kant emphasises reason in his theory. However, you cannot guarantee that the use of reason will lead everyone to the same conclusion. There are other factors which govern our reason. Eg. Background, society. What about people whose reasoning facilities are impaired. Are they therefore intrinsically immoral?