

# Kantian ethics

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



One of the beautiful things about Kantian ethics is that it is based on the individual. The individual can decide if their actions are worth doing to another person by weighing if the person would want the action done to them. The Kantian point of view is completely different from the Utilitarian point of view because the Kantian point of view deals with the individual, whereas the Utilitarian point of view deals with the group and the needs of the group. When you hear the words “basic human rights” or the word “right,” normally that responds to the individual, and rights in many cases are from the Kantian viewpoint.

For instance, when a police officer responds to someone in need, they are responding from a Kantian viewpoint – the rights of an individual. We have extended the Kantian point of view to cover animals as well. When you hear the term “animal rights”, it’s referring to the individual animal and the right of that animal as a living being. What did you do to receive Kantian rights? The answer is – be born. That is all you had to do. Kantian rights theory has a harder time being acknowledged in some collective group and tribal societies.

Kantianism is best used where there have been long periods of peace, a practice of respect, of tolerance and understanding. Kantian rights tend to dissolve in warlike conditions. Kant provides an example of a nonconsequentialist approach to ethics. He believed that moral rules could be known on the basis of reason alone, and said that we do not need to know the likely results of an action to judge it morally. Kant said that nothing was good in itself except for a good will. By will he meant the ability to act from

principle; only when we act from a sense of duty does our act have moral worth.

We determine our duty by the categorical imperative. An example of good will would be to use the “Golden Rule,” do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Kant uses this to say that a person’s actions are reflected in their actions toward another person. As a person intends to do good to another person, that makes his effort fit within the categorical imperative. Kant believed that there was one command that was binding on all rational agents—the categorical imperative, that says that we must always act so that the maxim of our action can be consistently willed to be universal law.

By maxim, Kant meant the principle or rule that people formulate to determine their conduct. If a maxim could not be universally applied without contradiction then it would not pass the test of the categorical imperative, and hence could not lead to a moral act. By contrast, a hypothetical imperative is one that tells us what to do if we desire a particular outcome. Let’s look at universal acceptability. We could look at the categorical imperative as enjoining us to prescribe moral laws for everyone; such laws must have universal acceptability.

There are laws that are the same across all cultures, and this would be an example of universal acceptability. For instance, stealing is wrong across all cultures. Murder is wrong across all cultures. Robbing is wrong across all cultures. Universal acceptance across all cultures is very similar to the Hammurabi codes for society. As early as 1790 B. C. Hammurabi made written codes for his society that were spread throughout the region and

adopted by many societies. It is these laws that in many cases offer the framework for universal acceptance across the globe as we know it today.

As rational creatures, Kant held that we should always treat other rational creatures as ends in themselves, and never merely as a means. This leads to the second formulation of the categorical imperative: One must always act so as to treat rational humanity as ends in themselves, and never as mere means. It is an interesting point that many people can describe themselves as either a giver or a taker. In theory, the takers use the givers for whatever purpose they want. The givers say they keep giving and the takers keep taking.

But it is sort of a paradox because there are more givers than takers, and the givers produce more worth than the takers. How does that define humanity as an end? The givers understand that takers have to view them as equals; the takers must accept that givers provide the beauty and acceptance that they need. Humanity is made up of people on both sides of the argument and those in between. By using one person, a taker, in all actuality, forms a dependent relationship on that person, or group of people, to provide for their needs. A giver sustains a taker by continuously giving them what they need.

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Kant stresses the importance of motivation and acting on principle. If you have ever heard the term "whistle blower," which we will discuss later in the chapter, we are talking about a person who makes a Kantian objection in the midst of a Utilitarian organization. Normally people who object to organization's conduct do so based on Kant's philosophy of telling the truth and hoping that the organization abandons its Utilitarian principles by pushing them closer to Kantian ethics. Now let's discuss some critical inquiries of Kant's Ethics. What has moral worth?

Kant holds that if a person does the right thing out of habit or sympathy, his act does not have moral worth. But this seems too severe. Is the categorical imperative an adequate test of what is right? It might be that there are exceptions to the general rules, such as stealing food if one is starving. What does it mean to treat people as means? It is not always clear when one is



treating a person as a means or not. It is true that there are people who advertise themselves as a means to an end, and in our modern society, we have given groups of people the power to be a means.

For instance, it used to be that we didn't need plumbers, that we made our own clothes, and provided our own food. But since the years of Kant's philosophy, we have changed and shifted to a consumer society where we buy all of the things that used to be made, thereby forcing people to depend on other people for the means of their survival. Kant's moral view has implications for organizations: It gives us firm rules to follow, such as never to lie. It forbids treating humans as means to an end.

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These obligations might conflict, and so our obligations are at least mostly prima facie ones—obligations that can be overridden by more important considerations. Some worry that utilitarianism makes people slaves to the general happiness. By contrast, many philosophers draw a distinction between those acts that people are required to do and those that are supererogatory—acts that it would be good to do but not immoral to omit. Supererogatory acts are those that go beyond the call of duty. The act of assisting others would fall into this category. Either code, statute, or federal laws are all an example of the basic, minimum standard.

But what happens if you go beyond the minimum standard? In that case, we would be going toward supererogatory actions. What about our own basic rights? A right is an entitlement to have others act in a certain way. Rights derived from a legal system are legal rights; from a moral system, moral rights. Moral rights that are not the result of roles, relationships, or

circumstances are human rights. These have several important characteristics: they are universal, they are held equally by all humans, they are not transferable, and nor can they be relinquished. They are also natural, in that they do not depend on human institutions.

Negative rights are rights to be free from external interference; positive rights are rights to have others provide us with certain goods, services, or opportunities. Let's look at other nonconsequentialist perspectives, such as prima facie obligations, assisting others, and moral rights. W. D. Ross held that we have certain specific moral obligations to others as well as those that are more general. These obligations might conflict, and so our obligations are at least mostly prima facie ones—obligations that can be overridden by more important considerations. Some worry that utilitarianism makes people slaves to the general happiness.

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