

Categorical imperative described by immanuel kant



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The Categorical Imperative which was initially described by Immanuel Kant is the theory that a person is to “ act only on the maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (O’Neill, 1993, p. 177). He believed that individuals are able to behave in a moral way due to their ability to think rationally and freely when making choices. He felt that a person’s moral duties are categorical imperatives, in that our morals tell us how we ought to act. He stressed that these moral duties command us to take certain actions – thus giving us the word imperative (Smith, 2010). Kant also felt that these moral responsibilities are relevant to individuals because of their rationality and because individuals have the ability to make their own decisions apart from others influence. The role of his categorical imperative within Kant’s ethics will be discussed in this essay as well as the limitations to his theory, leading to the conclusion that the categorical imperative may be a guiding ideal, but cannot be universally and fairly applied in the real world.

Kant’s ethics seem grounded in the basis of the idea that we each have rights to freedom, autonomy and democracy. Because these rights are ours, we therefore have the ability to make free, rational and moral choice. We can determine our duty through our ability to reason. Kant contends that the categorical imperative begins with the premise that human beings have a free will and that ability to reason (O’Neill, 1993, p. 175). Kant’s explanations make sense because he argued that in order to act morally, it was necessary for one to first be free to have the choice of being moral or immoral (Smith, 2010). He also felt that as rational beings, individuals are compelled through their rationality to follow norms and requirements in society, thus our

reasoned morality follows a set of internal laws which will then govern our actions.

In Kant's view, morality is characterized by the ability to universalize (O'Neill, 1993, p. 177). If a choice or action cannot be universalized across all agents, then it is irrational, unreasonable and therefore immoral. These choices or decisions can be called maxims, so a universalizable maxim is a moral maxim (O'Neill, 1993, p. 177). In contrast, subjective maxims are those which are not binding or applicable to all people and which cannot guide the actions of the moral, rational individual. So with the cornerstones of rationality and universalizability at the base of Kant's categorical imperative, we add his views on duty and good will.

To Kant, morality is based on the intent not on the action or outcomes of those actions. Acting with good will is acting with duty to others, through of course the reasoned conclusion that this duty is moral. According to Kant, this was the foundation of overall good. He highlighted the fact that "one cannot use action to judge whether a being was good or bad because sometimes some good actions may be an avenue for committing evil acts" (Smith, 2010). For example, to donate your money or possessions to others could be considered a good or worthy deed. However, if that donation is actually done to gain a heightened profile in the community or to hide resources from the government, then this will undermine the seemingly good act. Whether or not the action is good comes down to the intent of the individual, not the outcome. The connection can therefore be made that Kant characterized inherent good as good will, meaning that if one has pure intentions at the commencement of an activity, then no matter the result of <https://assignbuster.com/categorical-imperative-described-by-immanuel-kant/>

that activity, the individual would be considered to be good and dutiful, as they have removed “ empirical ego” from the decision (Schroeder, 2005, p. 19). The categorical imperative therefore gives us the ability to decide if an action is a moral or immoral one, in that it tells us to make our decisions not on our desires or expected outcomes, which would be hypothetical, but by making a decision which is the right, moral or categorical imperative (Smith, 2010). This is not a simple answer, as the categorical imperative is a way of leading us to decision making which is considered and which demands we assess our motivations for those decisions.

To apply Kant’s categorical imperative in a practical way, he offers four formulations to aid in its understanding. The first is the formula of universal law which states “ act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (Kant, 1998, p. 31). As stated earlier in this essay, this formulation relates to the universality principle. The second is the formula of the law of nature and asks us to “ act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature” (Kant, 1998, p. 31). This formulation relates to the parallels between the laws of nature and moral law. The third formulation of his imperative is of humanity and asks that you “ act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means” (Kant, 1998, p. 37). This describes his respect for others and our need in moral action to act well towards others in a universal manner. His fourth and final formulation for the categorical imperative is that of autonomy. It states that our actions are to be guided by “ the idea of the will of every rational being

as a will giving universal law” (Kant, 1998, p. 39). This principle of autonomy includes the concept of free and rational choice, as well as the capacity to compare and evaluate differing options. Unless directed by good will, autonomy is an ideal which will not be achieved in Kant’s theory.

There are limitations to the belief that moral requirements must be categorical. Kant’s own writing on the issue of lying shows a much debated weakness to his theory. In refuting a French philosopher who maintained that truth was only a duty if it did not injure others, Kant stressed that truth was a duty in and of itself. However great the disadvantage to self or others, Kant believed that the categorical imperative demanded truth in all human action – that it in fact was a sacred decree of reason (Kant, 1994, p. 281). The consequences of an action held little interest for Kant, as it was in the morality of the decision or action that he held forth. Yet the implications of such a rigid and insensitive view of the actuality of human existence make Kant’s theory of categorical imperative unrealistic (O’Neill, 1993, p. 182).

When a person obeys the categorical imperative, they are working within an ideal which presents them with the choice to make independent, ethical decisions (Katchy, 2007). One can only have this choice if the idea of freedom of thought and action accompanies a lack of fear of “authoritarian repercussion for not conforming to the will of another” (Katchy, 2007). Kant believed that forefront on the minds and consciousness of people, should be their own self-interest, and that republics should be established, where law would be adopted by the citizenry over violence. This would support his belief that due to the categorical imperative to act morally, these republics would lead to the possibility of peaceful existence (Schroeder, 2005, p. 20).
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Whilst it may seem logical to some that all individuals are rational and level-headed because we as Kant's individuals have the capability to use such rational and level-headed ideas to guide our actions, the truth is that reality has little bearing on Kant's ideals (Katchy, 2007).

Kant presented sound theory which not only is used today by many, but was far-reaching for a theorist of the 1800's. His theories would by many be termed as simple common sense in today's world and the categorical imperative offers clear counsel for those who wish to place an underpinning theory to their day-to-day decision making. With an "absolute and detailed necessity of making sure that a person exercises their own will and does not conform to the ways of others" (Katchy, 2007), Kantian morality has an attitude that can be found in modern times. Individuals are able to rely upon logic to guide their actions in a rational way, but rationality is not due to logical behaviour. Kant's theory is relatively simplistic, be your own person, act morally and do not simply act as others tell you to, but with your own thought and evaluation (Katchy, 2007). It is also quite clear in confirming the distinction between understanding the duty towards self and our responsibilities towards others.

As a utilitarian however, the categorical imperative is not a sustainable view. As utilitarians, we must take into account the consequences of our actions and decisions and the impact of these actions or decisions on others. Kant's murderer at the door is a prime example of how the outcome of lying is so much better than of telling the truth – the correct response was to lie. But as an ideal to aspire to, the theory of the categorical imperative is a powerful one (Katchy, 2007) which transcends time or geography, upon which one can <https://assignbuster.com/categorical-imperative-described-by-immanuel-kant/>

establish their own moral foundation in a world which can be confusing and contradictory.