

Kant's account of categorical imperatives and universal laws

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In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Moral*, Kant attempts to obtain selected ethical rules from the concept of reason. He claims that morality is objective; and not determined by the consequences of an action, but by the intentions behind it. The starting point of Kant's ethics is the concept of freedom. According to his famous maxim that 'ought implies can', the right action must always be possible: which is to say, I must always be free to perform it; " what makes categorical imperatives possible is this, that the idea of freedom makes me a member of an intelligible world."

The categorical imperative, which, in Kant's moral philosophy, is said to be " the fundamental law of morality" ², provides the basis of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Moral*. He believes that moral law is a categorical imperative that is categorised by its application to everyone; it does not refer to desire; it is a product of human reason; and it can differentiate between good and bad principles.

The categorical imperative was formulated by Kant as an attempt to provide a criteria through which to judge moral law. It is a deontological approach to morality, i. e. it relies not on the consequences of an action but on whether an action is right or wrong for it's own sake. Kant bases his entire argument on reason, he believed that statements about the moral law were a priori and could be reached through logic alone, independent of experience.

The only thing in the world that is good without qualification, Kant claimed, is a good will: good intentions are good unconditionally. All good attributes require good intentions or else they may serve evil ends. The consequences of an action are irrelevant to assessments of moral worth, according to Kant,

though they are, of course, relevant to most other aspects of life. He argued that moral duties are unconditionally necessary, whereas non-moral imperatives are hypothetically imperative. They indicate what is rationally required on some condition, such as having a certain desire or interest.

The only appropriate motive for moral action is a sense of duty. Acting from a motive of duty is acting simply because you know that this is the right thing to do, not for any other motive. Kant argues that actions done solely from compassionate inclinations have no moral worth whatsoever as it is unclear whether the person is acting out of compassion, or a sense of duty - morality is open to every rational being; yet our inclinations are outside our conscious control.

Kant offers a number of formulations of the categorical imperative, the first of which is, " Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." 4 If the maxim, Kant claims, is a genuinely moral one, then it should be universalizable. This method of looking at ethical choices focuses on which actions are right. The notion of universalizability is a version of the so-called 'Golden Rule of Christianity', " Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". It is a priori in that it is based in what can recommend itself to reason alone. This explains its right to a 'universal' form, and to the kind of necessity embodied in the categorical 'ought'.

The second formulation of the categorical imperative is " Act so as to treat others and yourself always as ends, never simply means to ends". 5 This is another way of saying that we should not use other people, but should

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always recognise their humanity: the fact that they are individuals with wills and desires of their own. The restraint on our freedom is that we must respect the freedom of everyone. Kant claimed that to treat someone as a means to an end is equivalent to denying their fundamental humanity.

A kingdom of ends is an imaginary state whose laws protect individual independence, allowing everyone to be treated as an end rather than a means to an end. Kant's third imperative is, " Act as if through your maxims you were a law-making member of a kingdom of ends".⁶ In this kingdom nothing conflicts with reason, and the rational being is both subject and sovereign of the law that there obtains. Morality, according to Kant, is not just a matter of individual conduct, but also the foundation of societies. A principle that you could not will to be a law in this ideal state fails to pass this test, and is therefore not a moral principle.

One of the problems with Kant's moral philosophy is that it treats the emotions and individual character traits as irrelevant to our moral assessments of individuals. It does not matter to Kant if you are hard-hearted, provided you comply with moral law. Kant's approach, which focuses on what any rational being should do, ignores the centrality of emotions to human moral relations. He argues that emotions and inclinations can cloud the issue of whether or not you are acting morally. Kant does not rule out the possibility that those who feel compassion also act from reverence for the moral law; what he does say is that acting from compassion alone will not make your action a moral one. Nevertheless, Kant's dismissal of emotion does dehumanise moral relations.

Another problem with Kant's theory is the conflict between two moral rules. This can be seen in the example of 'the inquiring murderer': Imagine that someone is fleeing from a murderer and tells you he is going home to hide. Then the murderer comes along and asks you where the first man went. You believe that if you tell the truth, the murderer will find his victim and kill him. What should you do? Should you lie or tell the truth? According to Kant, morality is a matter of following absolute rules - rules that admit no exceptions, that must be followed regardless of the consequences. He believed, for example, that lying is never right, no matter what the circumstances. He would reason as follows:

1. You should do only those actions that conform to rules that you could will to be adopted universally.
2. If you were to lie, you would be following the rule " It is permissible to lie."
3. This rule could not be adopted universally, because it would be self-defeating: people would stop believing one another, and then it would do no good to lie.
4. Therefore, you should not lie.

Kant, therefore, would claim that in the case of the inquiring murderer, you should tell him the truth, because to not do so would be breaking a fundamental, moral law. In doing so however, you will be providing the murderer with the information he requires to commit an immoral act. Can then, in this case, the moral law, 'Do not lie', be broken in favour of the moral law, 'Do not commit murder'? Or, is the individual only responsible for

his or her own actions and therefore, in this case, only required to tell the truth?

It would seem that Kant believes that in this case, you should tell the truth, as the act of murder would not be your own immoral action, but that of the murderer. However, Kant also claims that, 'the only absolutely good thing is a good will'. Would the individual then, be morally right to lie to the murderer, thus 'overshadowing' their moral wrong-doing with the good intention of saving a person's life? Kant is not clear on this point, and it is because of this that I believe that Kant's account of categorical imperatives and universal laws do not elucidate ordinary criteria for judging right from wrong actions. His *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Moral*, does however, provide the bases of the structure of moral judgements, and their universalizability and impersonality.