

Study Guide: Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804)

Deontological (duty-based) ethical theory. Also a form of absolutism.

Actions are evaluated by examining the motives behind them.

- Evaluating actions by considering their consequences is sharply rejected. We can control our motives and intentions, but we are unable to control the consequences of our actions.
- “Ought” implies “can.” You can be held morally responsible only for those things that are under your control.

Logic as the Basis for Ethics:

An action is permissible if its motive is logically coherent. It is impermissible if its motive is irrational or contradictory.

Advantages:

1. Avoids error and prejudice.
2. Easy to defend moral judgments; provides a response to moral skeptics.
3. Makes the moral theory universal.
4. Answers the question, “Why should I be moral?” The answer is that to be immoral is to be irrational (and being irrational has clear practical drawbacks).

Permissible Actions and Praiseworthy Actions:

Not every permissible action is praiseworthy. To be permissible, an action must be based on a motive that is logically coherent. To be praiseworthy, an action must be based upon a specific motive: Respect for a moral law. That is, permissible actions are the ones that are performed out of a sense of moral duty. Implication: Helpful actions performed because of a “sunny disposition” (i.e., because one enjoys helping others) are not praiseworthy.

The Categorical Imperative:

An imperative is a statement that tells one how to behave. A *hypothetical* imperative is one that provides instructions for attaining a specified goal. A *categorical* imperative is one that provides instructions to be followed regardless of one’s goals.

The Categorical Imperative is Kant’s fundamental moral principle. He claims that it is absolute (no exceptions, never overridden by other moral considerations). It is used to determine whether an action is morally permissible. Kant provides several formulations of this principle. The two dealt with in this course will be called CI1 and CI2.

CII: An action is permissible if and only if it is performed on the basis of a maxim that one can will to be a universal law.

Maxim: The reason for one's action. Every voluntary action has a maxim. All maxims have the following format: *I will perform action A in circumstances C for motive M.* A, C, and M in this sentence are "blanks" that would have to be filled with the details of the particular action being evaluated.

Universal Law: *Everyone will perform action A in circumstances C for motive M.* This is not intended as a prediction of how people will behave. Instead, it is a means for determining whether you could coherently will that everyone act on the same maxim that you have acted on.

3 Steps for Using CII:

1. Find the maxim of the action being evaluated.
2. Change the maxim to a universal law. (Change the word "I" in the maxim to "Everyone.")
3. Check to see whether one could coherently will a situation in which everyone behaved according to this universal law. If such a situation is coherent, then the action in question is permissible. If the imagined situation is incoherent, then the action in question is impermissible.

The 4 Examples:

1. Suicide Case: A man considers committing suicide for motives of self-love. Is this permissible?
 - a. The maxim of the action is, "I will commit suicide [action] in these unpleasant circumstances [circumstances] for the motive of self-love motive]."
 - b. The universal law is, "Everyone will commit suicide in these unpleasant circumstances for the motive of self-love."
 - c. One cannot coherently will that everyone follow such a law. The motive of self-love simultaneously urges one to preserve and prolong one's life, and to end it (to avoid suffering). This is contradictory. Thus, the action in question is impermissible.
2. Borrowing Money: A person considers borrowing money and promising to repay it, even though she knows she will be unable to repay it. Is this permissible?
 - a. The maxim of the action is: "I will promise to repay a loan [action] when I know that I will not be able to do so [circumstances] for the motive of convenience [motive]."
 - b. The universal law is: Everyone will promise to repay a loan when they know they will not be able to do so for the motive of convenience.
 - c. One cannot coherently will that everyone follow such a law. The motive of convenience both urges one to make a lying promise about repaying the loan, but would also result in a very inconvenient situation (in which no loans were possible). This is self-defeating, so the action is impermissible.
3. Developing Talents: I know that I have talents that have not been developed, but I am too lazy to work on developing them. Is this permissible?

- a. The maxim of the action is: “I will leave my talents undeveloped [action] when I realize that I have certain abilities [circumstances] for the motive of remaining comfortable [motive].”
 - b. The universal law is: “Everyone will leave their talents undeveloped when they realize they have certain abilities for the motive of remaining comfortable.”
 - c. Although the motive of remaining comfortable pushes us to leave our talents undeveloped, everyone also has another motive: Wanting to get as much as possible out of life. This motive pushes us to develop our talents so we can benefit from them. Because these motives conflict, it is impermissible to leave all of one’s talents undeveloped.
4. Saving a Drowning Person: I am the only one who could save a drowning person, but doing so would be uncomfortable. Is it permissible for me to let this person drown?
- a. The maxim of the action is: “I will let this person drown [action] when I am the only one who could perform the rescue [circumstances] for the motive of remaining comfortable [motive].”
 - b. The universal law is: “Everyone will allow others to drown when they are the only ones who could perform the rescue for the motive of remaining comfortable.”
 - c. One cannot coherently will that everyone follow such a law. Our motive of remaining comfortable is in conflict with another motive: Wanting to be assisted when we are in need of rescue. These motives are in conflict, so it is not permissible to allow others to go without assistance.

Types of Duties: The 4 examples above also illustrate the 4 possible classifications of moral duties. These categories are generated by the following distinctions:

Duties to self/Duties to others

Perfect duties/Imperfect duties

Perfect duties are ones that must be fulfilled at every opportunity. Imperfect duties are ones that must be fulfilled at some point, but we are allowed to decide when and how this is done.

Whether a duty is perfect or imperfect depends upon the sort of contradiction one encounters when one considers violating that duty:

Internal Contradiction → Perfect duty: An internal contradiction arises when a single motive pulls you to do conflicting things. E.g., In the suicide example, the motive of self-love urges you to both end your life and preserve it.

External Contradiction → Imperfect duty: An external contradiction arises when two different motive pull you to do conflicting things. E.g., In the example of saving the drowning person, the motive of remaining comfortable urges you to let the person drown, but the motive of wanting to be assisted when you need help urges you to help others.

Categories of Moral Duties	Perfect Duties	Imperfect Duties
Duties to Self	Suicide example	Developing talents example
Duties to Others	Repaying loan example	Saving drowning person example

CI2: Kant recognizes that his first version of the Categorical Imperative is difficult to apply, so he presents a second formulation (CI2). This new formulation is intended to present exactly the same moral principle, but is much easier to apply. It is as follows:

CI2: An action is permissible if and only if the agent does not treat any rational being merely as a means.

Kant believes that only humans are rational, and that only rational beings have intrinsic value.

To treat someone merely as a means is to use that person as a tool for getting what you want, and ignoring the fact that this person also has wants that are worth fulfilling.

3 Steps for applying CI2: An action is permissible provided *all* of these conditions are met:

1. Others are involved in the action *voluntarily*.
2. The benefits from the action are (at least roughly) *equal*.
3. Others are treated with *politeness and respect*.

Are CI1 and CI2 Equivalent? No, they're not. If they were equivalent, then they would always yield the same moral judgments when applied to cases. But there are at least some cases in which they yield conflicting judgments. E.g., the example in the text about killing one prisoner to save 19 others. CI1 says this is permissible, but CI2 says it is impermissible.