

# IMMANUEL KANT



Immanuel Kant  
(Gemälde von I. B. Becker, 1768)

*Few philosophers in history have been so unreadable and dry as Immanuel Kant. Yet few have had a more far-reaching impact on human thought. Kant's devoted servant, Lumppe, is said to have faithfully read each thing his master published, but when Kant published his most important work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Lumppe began but did not finish it because, he said, if he were to finish it, it would have to be in a mental hospital.*

□ Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was a German Philosopher, born in Königsberg, a university town now in modern day north-eastern Germany. His extensive philosophical writings have led many to consider him as one of the world's greatest thinkers; the depth and range of his philosophical thought mark him out as unrivalled among the more modern philosophers. Besides his masterwork, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), he wrote smaller works that concern themselves with ethics:

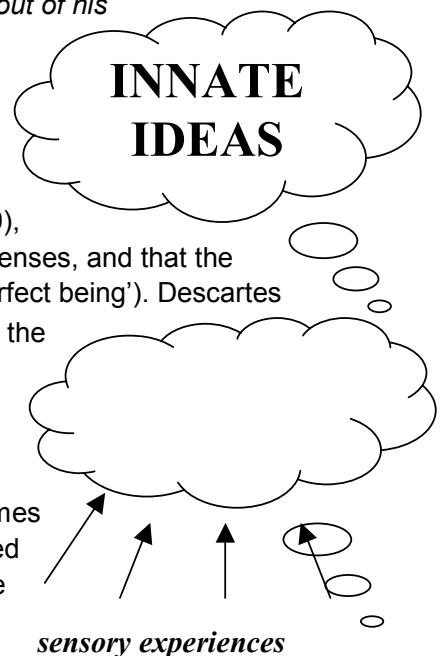
*Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (1785),  
*Critique of Practical Reason* (1788).

Remarkably, for one to be so hugely influential, Kant led a very ordinary, routine bachelor existence. The German poet, Heinrich Heine, wrote of him that:

*... he lived an abstract, mechanical, old-bachelor existence, in a quiet remote street in Königsberg ... Rising from bed, coffee-drinking, writing, lecturing, eating, walking, everything had its fixed time; and the neighbours knew that it must be exactly half-past four when they saw Professor Kant, in his grey coat, with his cane in hand, step out of his house door, and move towards the little limetree avenue ...* (cf. Palmer, p 96).

Kant lived through philosophical tremors. His earlier intellectual life was as a **Rationalist**. Rationalists, like Descartes (1596-1650), believe that we know truth through the intellect, not through the senses, and that the mind has its own innate (inborn) ideas (for example, 'God is a perfect being'). Descartes believed that mathematics is a realm of 'eternal truth' revealed to the mind without reference to experience.

**Empiricists**, such as Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, argued that human knowledge originates in our sensations. Locke had also argued that the mind is a blank slate, or a *tabula rasa*, that becomes populated with ideas by its interactions with the world. Kant argued that the blank slate model of the mind is insufficient to explain the



beliefs about objects that we have; some components of our beliefs must be brought by the mind to experience.

When Kant read the **Empiricist** David Hume, he wrote the Scottish Empiricist, '*woke me from my dogmatic slumber*'. Hume questioned 'cause and effect' as an *a priori* universal law – it was, in Hume's view, merely association through repetition.

### **Kant's 'Third Way' between Rationalism and Empiricism**

*Kant's synthesis of Rationalism and Empiricism: Concepts without sense-input are empty; sense-input without concepts is blind.*

Kant's most original contribution to philosophy is this:  
*it is the representation that makes the object possible rather than the object that makes the representation possible.*

He called this his 'Copernican Revolution'. Just as Copernicus had shown that the Earth revolved around the Sun, and not *vice versa*, so Kant argued that the mind determines the way in which we experience things, not the external things themselves.

This introduced the human mind as an active originator of experience rather than a passive recipient of perception. Kant thought that the mind *organises* experience through mental categories of space, time and causality. A weak analogy might be the way a computer processes the stream of ones and zeros of binary as instructions.

For Kant, perceptual input must be *processed* or it would just be noise - "less even than a dream" or "nothing to us," as Kant alternatively puts it. He put forward the distinction:

**Phenomena** – things experienced through the senses,  
**Noumena** – things as they actually are in themselves.

### **Kantian Ethics**

So what's this all got to do with ethics? Quite a lot actually. Kant said that the job of philosophy was to answer the questions:

1. what can I know?
2. what ought I do?
3. what may I hope for?

His *Critique of Pure Reason* was meant to address (1), whilst later works like the *Critique of Practical Reason* were aimed at (2) (and (3) to a lesser extent).

Broadly speaking, Empiricism in basic philosophy usually leads to some kind of utilitarianism in ethics. How will Kant's basic philosophy drive his ethical thinking? He asserts that we cannot really perceive 'things in themselves'. Our mind puts some kind of organizing framework (the mental categories of space, time and causality, etc.) onto everything, turning 'noumena' into 'phenomena'.

So, utilitarianism, which relies on weighing up consequences, is unreliable. We will never have enough evidence, and will disagree about interpretation. He also accepted Hume's observation that one can never argue logically from an 'is' to an 'ought'. The category of description (is) and the category of evaluation (ought) are logically separate. So Kant's starting point for ethics is not 'evidence' – or phenomena.

Instead he starts at driving obligation in the mind that says 'I ought ..'. For Kant, the sense of 'I ought' is more certain than the sense of 'I am glad' or 'I am cold'. 'I ought' derives from the noumenal world of reality not the phenomenal world of apparent reality. Kant's ethics are DEONTOLOGICAL (duty-driven), not CONSEQUENTIALIST/UTILITARIAN (consequence-driven).

Kant believed that the *Summum Bonum* – the highest good – was achievable through the moral (duty-led) life. The Universe is rational and fair. Thus, since the experience of inward moral prompting was noumenally certain, Kant believed other things follow as *postulates* (unproven but necessary assumptions):

- **freedom** (to choose whether to act this way or not – without this, there is no choice, moral or otherwise),
- the **existence of God** (God is the moral guarantor who ensures the virtuous do receive happiness),
- **immortality** (so that the fairness in the universe might ultimately be realised for persons).

### The Good Will

*Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good, without qualification, except a good will.*

For Kant, the sense of moral obligation is sourced in the mind – not by weighing up outside factors. He starts with something he calls 'the good will'. The will, Kant says, is the faculty of acting according to a conception of law.

What is 'the good will'? Kant called it the only thing that is 'good in itself' – good without qualification. All other 'goods' need qualification (i.e. extra explanation).

So:

- wealth is good, but what of it supports the arrogance and pride of the wealthy person?
- pleasure is good, but what of the pleasure of a sadist?
- bravery is good, but what of the bravery of a mafia hitman?
- intelligence is good, but what of intelligence of an evil genius?

For Kant, only the good will is good intrinsically. Thus the morality of our actions does not depend upon their outcome. What we can control, however, is the will behind the action.

The morality of an action, therefore, must be assessed in terms of the *motivation* behind it. If two people, Smith and Jones, perform the same act, from the same conception of the law, but events beyond Smith's control prevent her from achieving her goal, Smith is not less

praiseworthy for not succeeding. We must consider them on equal moral ground in terms of the will behind their actions.

### **Hypothetical Imperative & Categorical Imperative**

So what test did Kant propose to ensure the will was good in any particular intention?

He mentioned two types of imperative (command):

- the **hypothetical** imperative,
- the **categorical** imperative.

Hypothetical imperatives are of the kind: *you should do X, if you want to achieve Y.*

*You should train hard, if you want to be an athlete.*

*You should diet, if you want to lose weight.*

*You should be friendly to others, if you want to make friends.*

But Kant rejected the idea that moral imperatives are hypothetical in nature. Our actions cannot be moral on the ground of some conditional purpose or goal. Morality requires an *unconditional* or *categorical* statement of one's duty.

The moral imperative is unconditional; that is, its imperative force is not influenced by the conditional "if I want to achieve some end, *then* do X." It simply states, do X.

Kant believes that reason dictates a **Categorical Imperative** for moral action. He gives at least two formulations of the Categorical Imperative.

1. 'Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.'

2. 'Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.'

What are Kant's arguments for the Categorical Imperative? First, consider an example. Consider the person who needs to borrow money and is considering making a false promise to pay it back. The maxim that could be invoked is, "when I need of money, borrow it, promising to repay it, even though I do not intend to." But when we apply the universality test to this maxim it becomes clear that if everyone were to act in this fashion, the institution of promising itself would be undermined. The borrower makes a promise, willing that there be no such thing as promises. Thus such an action fails the universality test.

**Kant's examples on test maxims**  
*(from: Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals)*

1. A man reduced to despair by a series of misfortunes feels wearied of life ... His maxim is: "From self-love I adopt it as a principle to shorten my life when its longer duration is likely to bring more evil than satisfaction." It is asked then simply whether this principle founded on self-love can become a universal law of nature ...

2. Another finds himself forced by necessity to borrow money. He knows that he will not be able to repay it, but sees also that nothing will be lent to him unless he promises stoutly to repay it in a definite time ... Suppose however that he resolves to do so: then the maxim of his action would be expressed thus: "When I think myself in want of money, I will borrow money and promise to repay it, although I know that I never can do so."

3. A third finds in himself a talent which with the help of some culture might make him a useful man in many respects. But he finds himself in comfortable circumstances and prefers to indulge in pleasure rather than to take pains in enlarging and improving his happy natural capacities. He asks, however, whether his maxim of neglect of his natural gifts, besides agreeing with his inclination to indulgence, agrees also with what is called duty ...

4. A fourth, who is in prosperity, while he sees that others have to contend with great wretchedness and that he could help them, thinks: "What concern is it of mine? ... I will take nothing from him nor even envy him, only I do not wish to contribute anything to his welfare or to his assistance in distress!" ...

**Which of these imperatives are univeralizable?**

- a) *Come first in examinations*
- b) *Never speak until you are spoken to*
- c) *Do not give money to the poor*
- d) *Sell all you have and give to the poor*
- e) *Jump the queue*
- f) *Lie when it is convenient to do so*
- g) *Shoot first and argue later*
- h) *Be different: die your hair blue*
- i) *Keep the population down: abstain from sexual relations*
- j) *Take what you want*
- k) *Be polite: let the other person enter first*
- l) *Defend yourself but never start the fight*

A modern rendering of Kant's Categorical Imperative might be:

**An act is morally right if and only if the agent of the act can consistently will that the generalised form of the maxim of the act be a law of nature.**

or, clearer still:

**An act is morally right if and only if its maxim is universalizable.**

**Reapplying this thinking to Kant's four examples given...**

*Suicide when the continuance of life threatens more evil ...*

**Maxim: When continuing to live will bring me more pain than pleasure, I shall commit suicide out of self-love.**

**General M: Whenever continuing to live will bring anyone more pain than pleasure, he will commit suicide out of self-love.**

Kant concludes that the principle *cannot* be universalized because

**'... a system of nature by whose law ... is to stimulate the furtherance of life should actually destroy life would contradict itself ...'**

Thus, Kant senses a *contradiction in the law of nature*.

***Making a false promise when it is thought necessary ...***

Maxim:

General M:

Conclusion

***Rusting talents ...***

Maxim:

General M:

Conclusion

***I'm all right Jack ...***

Maxim:

General M:

Conclusion

## KANT - SOME CRITICISMS

### POSITIVE CRITICISM

- Kant's theory has its attractions; we all admire the person who acts on principle, whose sense of duty leads them to 'do the right thing' even when their inclinations lead them elsewhere (see example beside).
- We also recognise that some of our impulses are base and need to be resisted by the exercise of reason.
- Some would see in Kant's thinking an echo of the Golden Rule: *treat others as you would have them treat you*.
- Kant realises the immense importance of the concept of *universality* for ethics. What's fair for one is fair for all. One of our basic intuitions in the moral life centres around the belief that what is fair for one is fair for all. If I'm allowed to run traffic lights whenever I want to, then everyone else should be allowed to do so as well. There would be something wrong, something *unfair*, about allowing me to disobey traffic signals whenever I choose, but demanding that everyone else treat them as binding. Part of Kant's insight into morality is that it is equally applicable to everyone.
- Kant's ethical thought, unlike that of the utilitarians, gives attention to *motive* - something most feel an indispensable part of morality.
- In his second formulation of the *Categorical Imperative*, Kant upholds the intrinsic worth of human beings; they are not merely things to be manipulated for one's personal ends.
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### AN EXAMPLE OF 'PURE DUTY'

After Abraham Lincoln's assassination, Andrew Johnson became President. He pursued Lincoln's policy of reconciliation and rebuilding in the South. Radical Republicans disliked Johnson personally and wanted to punish southern states because of the war. These Republicans needed a two-thirds majority to overrule the President - and also to impeach him (declare him unfit for office).

Edmund G. Ross was appointed to finish out the Senate term of the deceased Jim Lane (a Johnson supporter). It looked as though the radical Republicans would at last have their solid two-thirds majority.

The bill of impeachment was passed by the House early in 1868, and went quickly to the Senate for a vote on Johnson's removal from office. Public sentiment was strongly against Johnson, and especially strong in Kansas, Ross's home state. Ross knew well that he would probably lose his political career and any further opportunities for success in public life if he failed to vote against Johnson. He opposed Johnson's policies and disliked him personally. Yet despite all of this and in the face of intense pressure and threats to his life and reputation, Ross took seriously his oath "to do impartial justice." His was the deciding vote on the floor of the Senate, and his decision was clear: Andrew Johnson did not deserve to be removed from office.

Ross was never elected to political office again. He was shunned by his former friends and sentenced to a life of isolation and relative poverty.

## NEGATIVE CRITICISM

- Kant's presentation of his arguments is complex, his terminology obscure.
- Many would question the very basis of Kant's epistemology (theory of knowledge - phenomena/noumena) which is the basis for his ethical writings.
- If I act on principles that I could wish were universal laws of nature, this does not render my principles necessarily good. Bigots or racists may see themselves as very principled.
- Many of those who were accused of war crimes in the trials of Nuremberg would claim they were 'following orders', that they had taken an unbreakable oath of loyalty to Hitler. Adolf Eichmann appealed to Kant's notion of duty in his defence of his actions at Auschwitz, claiming that he was just "doing his duty."

*I had known the Categorical Imperative , but it was in a nutshell, in a summarized form. I suppose it could be summarized as, "Be loyal to the laws, be a disciplined person, live an orderly life, do not come into conflict with laws"—that more or less was the whole essence of that law for the use of the little man. (Eichmann)*

- There are countless examples of an action which it is advisable and understandable for an individual to perform, and yet the individual could not will the principle of his action become 'a universal law of nature'.

For example:

**Maxim** *When the Stock Market Index reaches 1000, I shall withdraw all my money from the bank.*

**Gen. M** *Whenever the Stock Market Index reaches 1000, everyone should withdraw all their money from the bank.*

**Maxim** *Even if I get the grades, I have decided I shall not study to become a doctor.*

**Gen. M** *Even if any person gets the grades, they should decide not to study to become a doctor.*



- There are also countless examples of trivial actions whose principles could be universalized.
- Kant insisted on the absoluteness of moral rules. Can 'never tell a lie' be applied in all circumstances, as Kant insisted?
- Kant's thought does not seem to cater for conflict of duty. If it is always wrong to tell a lie, and always right to keep a promise, what happens if we promise to conceal a friend from a potential murderer, but are then asked by the murderer where our friend is?
- He denies any merit to action that is not morally motivated, however well it conforms outwardly with the moral law, and this has aroused criticism on the ground that many acts are better done out of love than out of a sense of duty.

Several critics of Kant's ethics have argued that his exclusive emphasis on duty as the sole motive of moral action leads to moral alienation.

Consider Kant's example of the man who had no "sympathy for the fate of others," but helped them solely out of a motivation of duty. Yet why is it wrong—or at least without moral worth—to help other people simply because you *care* about them?

- Essentially, Kant sees the moral agent as composed of reason and will—emotions are not part of the composition of the moral agent as such. Emotions were a threat to the autonomy of the moral agent for Kant, rather than an enhancement of it. Virtue Ethical Theory takes a radically different line on the question of emotions/desires and morality.
- Reason may be less reliable than Kant thinks. There is no shortage of examples in which reasons have been offered for morally suspect actions.
- Kant appears to believe in God not because it is true but because it is helpful. *'Why not believe in Santa Claus then? If I were God, I would favour an honest atheist over a dishonest theist, and Kant is to my mind a dishonest theist, because there is only one honest reason for believing anything: because it is true.'* (Peter Kreeft, US Catholic Philosopher)