

Things I Need to Know on Kant

Kant Summary

- Immanuel Kant was one of the most influential modern philosophers. He was an objectivist, whose principles relied heavily on the rationality of agents. He argues for a single objective method of determining which maxims are moral and which are not. This rule is known as the categorical imperative, which is outlined in one of his seminal texts, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Unlike hypothetical imperative that come in the state-contingent form of "If X do Y," Kant's categorical imperative requires universalisability – a moral law must apply regardless of the circumstances.
- Kant provides four formulations of the categorical imperative. He claims that they are equivalent and the progression from each is intended to bring the imperative closer to our feelings. The first is known as the formula of the universal law, positing that an agent ought to "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law." The second formulation postulates that we should never act in such a way that we treat humanity, whether in ourselves or in others, as a means only but always as an end in itself; this is the formula of humanity. The autonomy formula – act so that through your maxims you could be a legislator of universal laws – follows as the third formulation, highlighting the autonomous nature of rationality. Finally, Kant proposes the kingdom of ends formula: "act in accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends." In this fourth formulation, agents are legislating as ends in themselves while also treating others as ends in themselves.

What is the value of rationality in Kant's argument?

- Kant is an objectivist
 - We need to assume that the world as it presents itself to us is tractable to the methods of the natural sciences, and therefore investigable in that way
 - However, Kant argues that there are facts that are to be discovered by faculties that have nothing to do with the senses (but information that leads us to realising those facts comes in through the senses)
- Scruton (2001)
 - Kant holds the practical view of reason that reason may contain and justify both the means and the ends
 - PP adds: it provides the 'synthetic' force that the analytical approach of the hypothetical imperative lacks
 - "If there are imperatives that arise simply by the exercise of reason, then reason alone can move us to action,"
- Autonomy
 - Morality should be autonomous and reason makes that possible (Williams 2006)
 - Any reason for being moral is either moral or non-moral
 - If it is moral then it cannot be a reason for being moral because one would already have to be in the realm of moral to accept it
 - A non-moral reason cannot be a reason for morality because morality requires a pure motive, which Kant takes to be an obligation
 - So reasons for being moral has to be a categorical reason
 - According to the autonomy formula, rationality is what gives force to the moral law

What is Kant's conception of freedom? What is the two aspects view?

- Scruton (2001)
 - Kant has a famous maxim 'ought implies can'
 - The right action must always be possible – the agent must always be free to do it
 - However, Kant realises there is a theoretical contradiction

- Every change that occurs in nature has a cause – and this is an established principle which allows for no exceptions – so everything that happens in nature is “bound in chains of ineluctable necessity”
- Yet, we think of ourselves as the originator of our actions, freely choosing without being bound by an external constraint
- The contradiction: if we are free to choose our action then nature is not bound by causal necessity BUT if the causal chains in nature dictates everything then my decisions to act never matters
- Reconciliation: Kant is sometimes content with agents merely thinking of themselves as being free
- To solve this issue, Kant views the world as having two aspects while being a substance monist
 - One thing with two aspects – physical and mental aspects
 - Not everything in the world has a mental aspect but we do
 - There is a noumenal self that is not part of nature (or time)
- Freedom is a transcendental ‘idea’ without application in the empirical world
 - Transcendental as a “form of knowledge, not of objects themselves but of the ways in which we are able to know them” (Caygill 1995)
 - a priori (without experience) concept
- Kant’s compatibilism: I am free whenever the cause of my action is within me (SEP)
 - PP adds: Cause of action not necessarily the effect of it
- Freedom is the autonomy of the will
 - The power to will an end of action for myself; the ability to be governed by reason
 - An action originates in me whenever I decide on the action, simply on the basis of considering it, without consulting my desires, interests, or other empirical conditions, since that is to subject myself to the causality of nature (hence there would be a contradiction as aforementioned)
 - If we were also deciding based on our desires we will be deciding with factors above our control (including above the control of rationality)
 - If we were solely ruled by desires we would be heteronomous (subject to external causes)
 - Your desires are shoved into you by society (they are acquired by nurture not by nature)
 - Reason has to be categorical in form: applies to me regardless of what I desire
- Metaphysical difficulties with Kant’s transcendental view of freedom
 - (1) It is difficult to individuate the transcendental self
 - According to Kant, the freedom to act is the ability to be governed by reason
 - But the laws of reason are universal
 - It is difficult to differentiate one agent from another since both are merely subjects of those laws of reasons
 - PP response: it is not important for a moral law to facilitate an individual conception of self; the individual conception of self stems from the combination of empirical experiences (e.g. individual physical circumstances) and the agents’ degree of morality (how well they adhere to the moral law); since people tend to differ on these dimensions combined, individual characteristics should rather be thought of as a combined concept of the empirical and the transcendental aspects of the person
 - (2) The transcendental self is ineffective
 - The category of cause only applies to nature
 - So the transcendental self cannot itself cause anything
 - Given that the free decisions of the agent will never be causal to anything, it raises the question of why freedom should be so valuable?
 - Other reasons why freedom is not so valuable
 - Williams (2006): just because freedom is desirable does not mean we would always want to pursue it e.g. fruit is good but I don’t like fruits so I will not pursue fruit
 - Hegel (1820): The formula of the universal law of nature “is reduced to empty formalism, and moral science is converted into mere rhetoric about duty for duty’s sake.”

What is good will and why is it important?

- Caygill (1995): the good will is determined by the universal form of law, rather than by any end envisaged by the law
 - This requires that action be willed in accordance with the categorical imperative, or that the maxim of the will ‘should become a universal law’
- Payton (1948): The good will is the only absolute (unconditioned) good
 - Good without restriction or qualification
 - It remains good even when its results are not achieved
 - Any kind of will must aim at producing results but it’s ok if the results are not achieved
 - Other good things are conditioned goods (good under some conditions) and may be bad if they are used by a bad will
- SEP: “it is not an error of rationality to fail to take the necessary means to one’s (willed) ends, nor to fail to *want* to take the means; one only falls foul of non-moral practical reason if one fails to *will* the means”

What is the role of duty in Kant’s philosophy?

- SEP
 - A dutiful action from motives such as self-interest, self-preservation, sympathy and happiness, however praiseworthy it may be, does not express a good will
 - They may just conform to duty (in the sense that they are in accordance with duty) but really are not ‘dutiful’ at all
 - Motivation by duty consists of bare respect for the moral law
 - “To act out of respect for the moral law, in Kant’s view, is to be moved to act by a recognition that the moral law is a supremely authoritative standard that binds us and to experience a kind of feeling, which is akin to awe and fear, when we acknowledge the moral law as the source of moral requirements.”
 - We continue to respect in the authority of the moral law, according to Kant, even though we do not always adhere to it
 - Kant defines virtue as “the moral strength of a *human being’s* will in fulfilling his duty”
 - Duties can be derived from the categorical imperative

	Perfect duty	Imperfect Duty
Toward oneself	To refrain from suicide	To develop one’s talents
Toward others	To refrain from making promises you have no intention of keeping	To contribute to the happiness of others

- Another dimension of the taxonomy of duty (according to Kant) is whether they are narrow or wide
 - E.g. the duty to not steal is narrow and perfect because it precisely defines a kind of act that is forbidden whereas the duty of beneficence is wide and imperfect because it does not say exactly how much we should assist others

Categorical Imperative VS Hypothetical Imperative

- Hypothetical Imperatives
 - If X do Y
 - Can be valid, but cannot be objective since they are always conditional
 - An imperative is valid if whoever wills the end wills the means to it
 - Hypothetical imperatives do not correspond to a true command of reason
 - It is analytic because it merely connects the the agent’s end with the means to secure them
 - Obedience to hypothetical imperative always include obedience to conditions X so it always involves heteronomy in the will
- Categorical Imperatives
 - Do Y

- Categorical imperatives tell you what to do unconditionally
- Can be defended by reason
- Makes real and unconditional demands (and so are synthetic as opposed to analytic)
- For Kant, morality can be expressed only as categorical imperatives

Hypothetical Imperatives	Categorical Imperatives
If X do Y	Do Y
Can be valid (An imperative is valid if whoever wills the end wills the means to it)	Always valid (An imperative is valid if whoever wills the end wills the means to it); the means to an end are always willed under the categorical imperative, though they may not always want to do it
Subjective; applies conditionally	Objective; applies unconditionally
Cannot be defended by reason alone, although can be defended by reason in a limited sense E.g. If you want to stay dry, take an umbrella. I can defend this proposition by reason because I can point to the fact that it's raining and you're going for a walk that would take more than five minutes etc.	Can be defended by reason
Analytic; merely links means to end	Synthetic; makes real and unconditional demands

- Perfect and imperfect duties
 - We have an imperfect to do good things such as to benefit others
 - But if they are so good that they are good without qualification, why shouldn't we always stick to it?
 - OK so the good will can produce things that are good without qualification but we still need some context to determine when to exercise them

Why does the judgement for morality have to be *a priori*? Why can't a hypothetical imperative work?

- Payton (1948): Ethics must have an empirical part (one based on sensuous experience) as well as a non-empirical or a priori part (one not so based on sensuous experiences)
 - Kant make the basic a priori argument for his conception of morality in the Groundwork
- Hypothetical imperative lacks a priori part because it is conditional

What is Kant's categorical imperative?

- Getting to the categorical imperative (Scruton 2001)
 - To avoid conflicting duties, assume there is one categorical imperative – *the* categorical imperative
 - Isolate agents' interests, desires, ambitions etc. to get an imperative that recommends itself on the basis of reason alone, regardless of those individual circumstances
 - By this process of abstraction, we can arrive at a point of view outside our own experience that could be adopted by any rational being
 - So the law formulated by this process applies universally to all rational beings
- Kant provides many formulations of the same law, each bringing the law closer to our feelings

Formulation	Explanation	Evaluation
<p>(1) The Formula of the Universal Law of Nature</p> <p>“act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law”</p>	<p>(1) Come up with a maxim (“I will A in C in order to realise or produce E” where “A” is some act type, “C” is some type of circumstance, and “E” is some type of end to be realised or achieved by A in C) as a universal law of nature</p> <p>(2) Suppose that all rational agents act according to that maxim</p> <p>(3) Consider whether the maxim is conceivable in a world governed by this law of nature (e.g. to break a promise would fail this part) => if a maxim fails to fulfil this condition then one has a “perfect duty” to refrain from it</p> <p>(4) Consider if one could rationally will this maxim; if yes then the maxim is morally permissible (e.g. the maxim of refusing to assist others fails this part so we have a duty to sometimes assist others) => if a maxim fails to fulfil this step then one only has an “imperfect duty” to act according to it</p>	<p>Requires extra assumptions to explain why failure to conform to something we would rationally will is not just irrational but immoral:</p> <p>(1) Assume, as Kant claims, it is a “natural necessity” for us to will our own happiness as an end</p> <p>PP adds: this is similar to the assumptions of utilitarianism although Kant is not a consequentialist</p> <p>(2) Assume that a necessary means to achieving (normal) human happiness is not only that we ourselves develop some talent, but also that others develop some capacities of theirs at some time</p> <p>This is quite reasonable; I cannot develop my talent in piano if other people fail to develop their talents in hunting and harvesting such that I could survive without doing so</p> <p>(3) Assume that rational agents will the necessary and available means to any ends that they will</p> <p>If we will the development of our own talents, we must also will that other people develop their talents, but because whatever we will as the categorical imperative must be universalisable, we are forbidden from adopting the maxim of refusing to develop any of our own talents</p> <p>So to fail to conform to our will of happiness as an end by failing to develop our own talents is immoral because we would be stopping people from realising their ends of happiness too</p>

Formulation	Explanation	Evaluation
<p>(2) The Formula of Humanity</p> <p>We should never act in such a way that we treat humanity, whether in ourselves or in others, as a means only but always as an end in itself</p>	<p>We can use humans as means to an end but not as mere means; e.g. a horse is a mere means of transportation but a taxi driver is not</p> <p>Furthermore, it is the “humanity” in human beings not human beings per se that Kant bans us from treating as mere means; Our “humanity” is the collection of features that make us distinctively human, including capacities to engage in self-directed rational behaviour and to adopt and pursue our own ends, and any other rational capacities necessarily connected with these; We are permitted to use humanity as means if they could rationally consent to us doing so (e.g. taxi driver can demand a payment from us)</p> <p>The idea of an end Kant uses has a positive and a negative sense: Negative sense – humanity limits what I can do to pursue other ends (because I cannot just treat people as mere means to pursue my ends) Positive sense – humanity is something to realise, cultivate or further by my actions fully i.e. to perfect one’s humanity (like how a pianist practices piano to fully become a pianist, someone who realises they have humanity must practice that to have humanity); extends to others too: “I further the humanity in others, by helping further the projects and ends that they have willingly adopted for themselves”</p> <p>Kant’s formula of humanity requires respect in others; respect here is “recognition respect” e.g. to recognise that one is a student, teacher, or that one possesses humanity, which differs from appraisal respect, where one gains respect by passing certain qualification e.g. respected because they are a doctor (Darwall 1977)</p>	<p>Same outcome as (1)</p> <p>BUT Treating people with dignity and intrinsic value is different from rejecting contradictions so this formula is not equivalent to (1)</p> <p>Response: Kant has a very particular view of humanity based on rational capacity; the criticism should rather be that Kant has a strange choice of wording (maybe failing to bring the principle closer to feeling as a result)</p> <p>Tim likes to think of him as considering persons as such, not humans as such; newborn babies are humans, but not persons (according to him), so they have no duties (and – worryingly – nor can we have duties towards them, at least at first pass), although he covers for this hole in the argument by proposing child-care duties for parents.</p>

Formulation	Explanation	Evaluation
<p>(3) The Autonomy Formula</p> <p>Act so that through your maxims you could be a legislator of universal laws</p>	<p>The status of the moral law as that moral law is what obligates it.</p> <p>In (1), a rational will that is merely bound by universal laws could act accordingly from natural and non-moral motives, such as self-interest but (3) forbids these contingent motives (motives which rational agents may or may not have)</p> <p>“according to this formulation, to conform our behaviour to principles that express this autonomy of the rational will — its status as a source of the very universal laws that obligate it”</p>	<p>Same outcome as (1) and (2)</p> <p>Adds element of dignity and worth because us, as rational agents, are now the source of the moral laws that bind us</p>
<p>(4) The Kingdom of Ends Formula</p> <p>“act in accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends”</p>	<p>“our fundamental moral obligation is to act only on principles which could earn acceptance by a community of fully rational agents each of whom have an equal share in legislating these principles for their community”</p> <p>Formula (4) requires that we conform our actions to an ideal moral legislature which lays down universal laws, binding all rational wills including our own. Furthermore, that those laws are of a “merely possible kingdom” each of whose members equally possesses status as the legislator and hence must be treated as ends in themselves.</p>	<p>Allison (2011): following or applying each formula would generate all and only the same duties; So (4) had same outcome as (1), (2) and (3)</p> <p>Hill (1992): it is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for one’s treating persons in a morally permissible way that one treat them as ends in themselves</p>

Why is it wrong to treat someone as mere means?

- Mawson (2021)
 - As noted in the formula of humanity, it is permissible to treat people as means but impermissible to treat people as mere means.
 - For example, it is permissible to use the taxi driver to get one home but it would be impermissible to use the taxi driver as one would use an inanimate object (e.g. an automated taxi)
 - This is because to treat the taxi driver as mere means one is not responding them appropriately as one has failed to recognise the taxi driver’s humanity, as Kant puts (perhaps a better suited term for usage in the present day would be personhood).
 - That is, we have failed to recognise that the taxi driver is part of the noumenal world (as an agent with his own goals and purposes) as well as the phenomenal world (as a cause with certain causal capacities, such as to get oneself home in a taxi)
 - To see the taxi driver as a person (to respect their humanity, as Kant puts), one must see the taxi driver as someone towards whom one has obligations, although such obligations may be as minimal as being polite and providing the appropriate compensation for their service.
 - Thus, if one sees him this way – as a person – yet fail to treat him as an end in himself (as someone with their own goals and obligations etc.), one is failing in rationality.
- Why treating someone as mere means is bad
 - Treating someone as mere means is to fail rationality

- Failing rationality is bad because it implies one lacks humanity (since one is not a rational agent)
- So, treating someone as mere means is an act that not only disregards the person we are treating's humanity, but also our own
- We cannot rationally the failure of our own rationality
- Since the maxim of "treating someone as mere means" is not a universalisable law according to the categorical imperative, it would be immoral to do so

Promises

- Kant's categorical imperative forbids the breaking of promises, or at least entering into promises with the intention of breaking them
 - To break a promise is to will the abolition of promising
 - This also implies the agent also wills the abolition of the advantages that comes from breaking promises
 - So that is to abolish the motive of breaking the promise in the first place
 - Thus, to break a promise puts the agent into a contradictory position within the framework of the categorical imperative
- BUT what if we instead consider intentions
 - The moral law may be never to enter into a promise with the INTENTION to break it
 - This would allow one to serially make promises they cannot keep
 - Promise to 'not eat the kid's chocolate' etc.
 - Kant cannot distinguish between weakness of will to act on the intention and a failed attempt
 - E.g. Boris Johnson's overpromising demonstrates radically wrong judgements of capacity although he probably did not will such a huge health crisis
 - Character weaknesses are not morally assessable by Kant

What are some problems related to Kant's arguments?

- Schopenhauer (1818): Kant's moral philosophy can be deduced to egoism (I should not do to others what I do not want done to myself) but egoism is insufficient for moral philosophy because moral philosophy ought to have an element of sympathy, which focuses on specific people and specific situations
 - Kant rejects this idea of sympathy because it is context dependent (not categorical)
 - Kant has a more generalised notion of sympathy towards humanity
- The categorical imperative is unnatural and reduces to utilitarianism
 - Suppose I intend to cheat on my taxes
 - According to the categorical imperative, I would have to ask 'what if everyone did that?'
 - Then I would envision the disastrous effects such acts of tax evasion would have on the country in order to decide against cheating on my taxes
 - Here, it is clear that it is the consequences I am considering, so the categorical imperative can be thought of as a variant of rule utilitarianism
 - What Kant would probably respond
 - According to the process of the formula of the universal law of nature, one would forfeit the benefits they would accrue (getting to free ride on public goods) had everybody failed to pay their taxes, so a contradiction arises in a policy of universalised tax evasion
 - Hence, one has a perfect duty to refrain from such acts
 - What makes it bad is not the consequences of everybody not paying taxes but rather the widespread 'immoral' act
 - BUT the contradiction is a practical one, since it is to do with the economics of the free rider problem, rather than a logical one
 - ALSO even if it were to be a logical contradiction, it is hard to process since it is in the abstract; a good moral principle should be grounded in things a lay person can come to grasp with, for example the concept of empirical consequences
- Williams (2006)
 - Kant's argument were only explained in terms of egoistic hedonism
 - Animals also chase their desire for pleasure
 - BUT the difference is that if an agent sees himself as a rational agent (which animals cannot because they do not possess what Kant calls humanity), then they would be able

to see themselves as an agent among other agents and this conception enables the agent to take an impartial standpoint

- PP adds: BUT how do we know this is the case? Perhaps animals are rational too but we just fail to regard them as rational agents; if so then we are no different from other pleasure-seeking animals
 - Rationality is not enough to avoid being egoistic (contrary the suggestions of the autonomy formula)
- BUT someone that is impartial will not be left with enough identity to live a life that respects their own interests
 - The problem now is not that Kant's argument is egoistic but that it does not allow any room for individuality at all
- Anscombe (1958): there is no procedure for constructing maxims
 - There can be several maxims that may represent the agent's action
 - E.g. I yank out one of my healthy teeth and sell it to a dentist, who will then insert it into someone else's mouth can be "I should pull out my tooth and sell it to a dentist," or "I should extract a healthy part of my body and sell it," or "I should pull out my right upper molar and sell it to a dentist by the name of John Smith."
 - Each maxim has different implications
 - Defending Kant
 - It is not a problem for the categorical imperative
 - The agent has to test each maxim using the procedure of the first formula
 - What matters is the intention behind each maxim
 - BUT if the same intention can be executed in different ways, some which will pass the test of the categorical imperative and others don't, Kant is just admitting the significance of consequences (which he claims does not matter because those belong in the natural causal world)
- Kant's categorical imperative is not demanding enough
 - It is in line with Kant's conception of morality to reveal the hiding spot of a friend hunted down by an insane murderer
 - It is an absolute categorical imperative not to lie
 - Even when there is a murderer at the door trying to hunt down your friend and they ask for your friend's location, you still cannot lie
 - It would be moral to reveal your friend's location
 - PP adds: maybe we also have other moral imperatives e.g. to benefit others that impart upon us the duty to protect our friend in such a situation
 - Can instead say things like 'I prefer not to tell you where my friend is'
 - BUT if there is conflict among the duties, then this is not what Kant was aiming for either since Kant aims to have one universal moral law, which is the categorical imperative, to avoid conflict in duties

References

- Johnson and Cureton (2016) = SEP
 - <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/>