

## Immanuel Kant and the Ethics of Reason

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No matter what kind of world we find to be most valuable—a world containing the maximum pleasure or happiness—there remains the problem of conduct (which is one of the three main problems of ethics, the others being the problems of goodness and meta-ethics).<sup>1</sup> One answer to the problem of conduct, according to Kant (whose distinctive concern was to vindicate the authority of reason),<sup>2</sup> is to formalize the problem in accordance with practical as well as pure reason. By virtue of practical reason, rationality is capable of being a ground of action. Man alone possesses this capacity; the lower animals act from natural impulses only. Man also, since he is an animal, is moved by impulses and inclinations and naturally seeks satisfaction of his own desires; but, being rational, he finds himself subject to a moral ought, to the command, “So act that you can will the maxim of your conduct to be a universal law.” Since this unconditional command is, for each man, a dictate of his own rational nature and not imposed upon him from without, it represents the self-legislation or autonomy of the will. By contrast, action which is motivated merely by natural inclination represents a heteronomy of

the will, a subordination of the will to impulses and desires. Conditional commands are merely hypothetical, thus lacking in moral significance. There is only one strictly moral motive, namely, the motive to act from respect for the moral law itself. The idea is to take a moral principle to be a precept that satisfies the formal criteria of a universal law. It would take the formal criteria to be the marks of pure reason. Consequently, moral principles are laws that issue from reason; i.e., they are laws that we, as rational beings, give to ourselves and that regulate our conduct insofar as we engage each other’s rational nature. They are laws for a republic of reason or, as Kant says, a realm or kingdom of ends whose legislature comprises all rational beings.<sup>3</sup> Through this ideal, Kant makes intelligible and forceful the otherwise obscure notion that moral principles derive their authority from the sovereignty of reason.

In other words, in contrast to utilitarianism, Kant holds that consideration of ends (consequentialism) cannot be of primary importance for the moral agent, since a moral action is one that is commanded for its own sake,

not with a view to some purpose it is expected to bring about.<sup>4</sup> The imperatives of morality command categorically, unlike those of skill or prudence or cleverness, which have only hypothetical force. A rule of skill or a counsel of prudence or cleverness bids us to take certain steps if we wish to attain a certain end—good health or overall happiness, for example. There is no “if” about a command of morality—it is absolute duty that must be obeyed “blindly.” This is Kant’s celebrated Categorical Imperative, his concept of unconditional duty and moral law, on the authority of the sovereignty of reason.<sup>5</sup>

The categorical imperative has been criticized for different reasons. One could be that it is not very different from the venerable Golden Rule that reaches way back to hallowed antiquity (“do unto others as you would have them do unto you”). However, much more important, there are maxims that could not be universalized, and there are maxims that should not be universalized. For examples, “be a doctor” could not be (if everyone is a doctor, who are the patients?) and “it is right for me to lie, and for others to lie to me,” respectively. Further, even if a rule is universally applicable, it is not necessarily the case that it is a good or an acceptable one. One has but

to remember Auschwitz and Hiroshima in this context.

Although Kant was affected by empiricism, rationalism, skepticism, and a number of other influences, his contributions in every major branch of philosophy (namely epistemology, metaphysics, axiology, and logic) have exerted such profound effects in general that he has become a permanent benefactor of mankind. In particular, among many other considerations, his Categorical Imperative had even affected the important twentieth-century development of various human-rights movements. Why? Because a just society is one that recognizes individual rights and embeds them so well in its constitutional structure that no would-be tyrant or group of commissars—no matter how much they may proclaim “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”—can take them away. The “greatest happiness” is the happiness of each individual, and it cannot be achieved by the sacrifice of one individual to another individual or group of individuals. A theory of conduct that includes no explicit doctrine of human rights is a theory without a vital center, and no theory that assesses the rightness of acts in terms of consequences alone can ever provide it.

## NOTES.....

1. John Perry, Michael Bratman, and John Martin Fischer, *Introduction to Philosophy 8th ed.* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2019), 586–599.

2. Also spelled Emmanuel Kant (1724–1804), depending on editions. He had lived in Königsberg, East Prussia (today’s Kaliningrad, Russia). Kant was one of the greatest philosophers in the history of Western philosophy, almost as influential as Plato and Aristotle.

3. From *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Chapters 1 and 2, trans. H. J. Paton. In *Introduction to Philosophy 8th ed.*, ed. Perry, J., Bratman, M., Fischer, J. M., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 594.

4. Guram Tewsadse, *Immanuel Kant: Problems of Theoretical Philosophy* (Tbilisi, Georgia: Izdatelsvo Chelowneba, 1979), 308–321.

5. John Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis 2nd ed.* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 595–600. [Ω](#)