

Immanuel Kant

Explain the principle “You ought to act in such a way that you would be willing to universalise the act”

The principle of “Universalisation” was established by Kant in his work *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and it is a deontological ethical theory that seeks to provide a rational basis for morality. As part of the enlightenment movement Kant wished to go beyond the religious authority and superstition which had dominated western morality up until that era, he said “*The death of dogma is the birth of reality.*”

Kant was concerned by the work of sceptics such as Hume, who doubted the reliability of empirical evidence, and as a result of this he felt morality should have a rational – rather than empirical basis since “*There is nothing higher than reason*”. He argued that reason *defined* man, as an innate ability that we all share,. If this is true then Kant would have established a truly universal theory as each person would theoretically reach the same conclusion in any given situation.

The issue then becomes how we are to discover this rational means by which to determine morality, Kant focuses his ideas around the principle of duty. He says it is ones duty to be moral, and to be moral is to follow ones duty. We should not be sidetracked by emotions, feelings, love or inclinations but stick to our duty.

If a moral law is to be unconditionally binding is must be unconditionally and universally “good” – “*it is impossible to conceive if anything ... which can be taken as good without qualification except a Good Will.*” This notion of the “Good Will” is stating that it is having the right intention that makes the good will good, this is direct opposition to consequentialist theories which would argue you could have the wrong intention but “accidentally” do something good. Kant remarks that “*In law a man is guilty when he violates the rights of others. In ethics he is guilty if he only thinks of doing so.*”

It is important to note at this point that Kant also says “*Ought implies can*”, by which he means that it is only ever our duty to perform acts we are capable of – if it is not possible then it is not moral. Kant goes on to investigate how we know what our duties are – and his method is known as the categorical imperative. Kant believes that categorical statements are unqualified and unconditional and should be obeyed for duty’s sake; our very awareness of these imperatives is a reason to follow them.

“There is ... only one categorical imperative, it is to act according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become universal law.” This statement by Kant says we should follow those laws which we could imagine applied to everyone universally. For example we try a statement such as “always give money to the poor,” on the face of it this sounds morally valid, however could we apply it to everyone in the world? The answer is no, since the poor should not be made to give money to other poor people, some people cannot afford to give to charity. Therefore this statement cannot be willed to be universalised, and is therefore in Kant’s eyes not a moral statement.

Kant also gives us two exceptions as to when to not apply the principle of universalisation; these are contradictions in the law of nature, and contradictions of the will. Contradictions of the law of nature are where the law itself becomes self contradictory, for example, we could not universalise the statement “always open the door for somebody”, as if *everybody* did this, no-one would ever go through a door! However, so far we don’t seem to have been able to forbid actions we would currently view as morally reprehensible – such as murder or theft ... which is where the contradictions in the will comes in.

Maxims that could theoretically be to your detriment later are known as contradictions in the will, based upon Kant’s belief that we all seek the ultimate good in the *summum bonum*, he makes the judgement that we would not deliberately will things which could cause us problems later. For example, we cannot allow the statement “it is ok to steal when you need something”, since later you might be the person being stolen from. Likewise we would not wish to universalise “you should not help those in need”, as later you may be the needy one.

Kant makes two assumptions for his theory to be valid; firstly he says “Act so as to use humanity, yourself and others, always as an end and never as a means to an end.” By this he means that unlike a “democratic” system, the needs of every individual has to be taken into account without excluding any minorities. His second statement is that we should as if we live in a “kingdom of ends,” by this Kant means that we have to assume that everyone around us is going to use the same system to determine their morals.

Kant’s ideas are not strictly authoritarian, he does not set out a list of what is moral and what is not – but rather he gives us the guidelines from which to work out for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. For Kant the fact that we are free to make our moral choices is vital, since it is by process of reasoning that we gain the moral value – simply robotically following scripture does not constitute moral worth.

Analyse the strengths and weaknesses of this principle as an ethical theory

The basis of Kant's theory is that it is deontological; and therefore it sets out a system of rules which allow us to know the moral worth of our actions prior to performing them, purely on the grounds of the actions themselves. For example, if we are to help an old lady across the road, (assuming we accept this is an action with intrinsic moral worth), no matter what the outcome (i.e. if we accidentally walked her out in front of a large truck), our action is good – since we set out with good intention to perform a good act.

Of course, it can very easily be argued that despite the fact we set out with good intentions to help the old lady, nonetheless the fact we got her killed makes the act *bad*. This sort of consequentialist theory goes against Kant's beliefs, but would seem to many of us far more believable. Similarly, deontology may lay down the rule "killing is bad", however, is it always bad? Let's say we assassinated Hitler, the consequentialist would argue that we just saved many, many millions of lives, which far outweighs the fact we killed one person, whilst the deontologist maintains that we did a bad thing.

Kant's response would be that we cannot let emotions cloud our judgement, for emotions such as love and compassion can distort our judgement since they are unreliable and unpredictable. To take the examples before, how can it be morally reprehensible to have helped the old lady when we had no way of knowing she would be struck by the truck? Likewise how could we have known what Hitler would have done to have assassinated him safe in the knowledge we were saving lives? Kant sought a rational basis for morality, and one that was universally applicable to any person, at any given time, for any given situation.

In this way, we can see that Kant's thinking is quite in touch with the modern concepts of human rights. It does not compromise the value of any individual for any sake, unlike Utilitarianism, which states that "good" is that which benefits of the most people for the most time. Kant maintains that all humans have equal moral worth – an intrinsic value – which comes from our ability to reason, however we can question this concept. Are we all equally able to be rational? Kant himself originally stated that women and people of a black ethnic background could not reason as well as the white male, but even in our modern society we have to question whether we are all of the same ability to reason. Kant's theory only works under the assumption that we live in a kingdom of ends, and were this to be compromised his theory is seriously damaged.

The summum bonum plays a key part in Kant's theory; however it makes the assumption that all humans seek the same ends. On the face of it this would seem likely, the majority of the population share common morals and seem to work towards similar goals with similar motivations. However, there are exceptions to this case, for example the sadist. Kant assumes we all seek the best for ourselves and everyone else in the form of "Good", however the sadist seeks to inflict pain upon themselves and others. The universalisations made by a sadist would surely not be the same as those made by a non-sadist. Applying Kant's rules to a statement such as "I should inflict pain upon others", the non-sadist would reject this as a contradiction in the will, since it may cause them to be harmed later, however the sadomasochist has no problems with having pain inflicted upon them, and will thus happily universalise the statement to make it moral law.

A further problem we see with the idea of universalisation specifically is that fact that, given a specific enough statement, we can universalise anything. For example, we reject the statement "it is acceptable to lie when convenient to do so" on the basis that at some point, someone might lie to us and cause us a problem. However, if we were to say "it is acceptable to lie to a police officer named John to prevent myself from being charged with petty theft on August 19th, 2005" this appears universal as we have defined it so specifically it cannot conceivably cause us conflict at a later date.

The fact we can therefore universalise (and thus make morally acceptable) rules such as this, which are clearly against the common consensus of morality brings in to doubt Kant's whole theory. In a similar vein we find we can also universalise statements which have no moral worth at all, such as "I should wear blue shorts on Tuesday". Everybody can conceivably wear blue shorts on Tuesdays, and therefore the statement obtains moral value – despite it clearly *actually* having no moral worth whatsoever.

As a final twist of the knife in the demise of Kant's theory is the idea that it is parasitic. This means that it is based upon the precept that we already have an idea of what right and what is wrong. Kant's theory works by testing our beliefs, however, that presupposes we have beliefs to test, and thus presupposed us having experienced these things. For example, when we consider contradictions in the will, how do we class what will be detrimental to us later? We have to base this upon our previous experiences, this relies on a posteriori knowledge – the very thing Kant was trying to do without!

We have seen that not only are there weaknesses in the deontological nature of Kant's theory, as well as concerns about over-generalisations he may have made – Kant's theory actually fails in what it sets out to be – an a priori and universal test for morality.