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Immanuel Kant's philosophy is an example of *deontology*, which is opposed to utilitarianism.

Immanuel Kant

Kant's most distinctive contribution to ethics was his insistence that one's actions possess moral worth only when one does his duty for its own sake. Kant first introduced this idea as something accepted by the common moral consciousness of human beings and only later tried to show that it is an essential element of any rational morality. Kant's claim that this idea is central to the common moral consciousness expressed, albeit in an explicit and extreme form, a tendency of Judeo-Christian ethics; it also revealed how much Western ethical consciousness had changed since the time of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Does common moral consciousness really insist that there is no moral worth in any action done for any motive other than duty? Certainly one would be less inclined to praise the person who plunges into the surf to rescue a drowning child if one learned that he did it because he expected a handsome reward from the child's wealthy parents. ~~This feeling lies behind Kant's disagreement with all those moral philosophers who argued that one should do what is right because that is the path to happiness, either on earth or in heaven~~. But Kant went further than this. ~~He was equally opposed to those who regard benevolent or sympathetic feelings as the basis of morality.~~ Here he may be reflecting the moral consciousness of 18th-century Protestant Germany, but it appears that even then the moral consciousness of Britain, as reflected in the writings of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Butler, and Hume, was very different. The moral consciousness of Western civilization in the early 21st century also appears to be different from the one Kant was describing.

Kant's ethics is based on his distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives. He called any action based on desires a hypothetical imperative, meaning by this that it is a command of reason that applies only if one desires the goal in question. For example, "Be honest, so that people will think well of you!" is an imperative that applies only if one wishes to be thought well of. A similarly hypothetical analysis can be given of the imperatives suggested by, say, Shaftesbury's ethics: "Help those in distress, if you sympathize with their sufferings!" In contrast to such approaches, Kant said that the commands of morality must be categorical imperatives: they must apply to all rational beings, regardless of their wants and feelings. To most philosophers this poses an insuperable problem: a moral law that applied to all rational beings, irrespective of their personal wants and desires, could have no specific goals or aims, because all such aims would have to be based on someone's wants or desires. It took Kant's peculiar genius to seize upon precisely this implication, which to others would have refuted his claims, and to use it to derive the nature of the moral law. Because nothing else but reason is left to determine the content of the moral law, the only form this law can take is the universal principle of reason. Thus, the supreme formal principle of Kant's ethics is: "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

Kant still faced two major problems. First, he had to explain how one can be moved by reason alone to act in accordance with this supreme moral law; and, second, he had to show that this principle is able to provide practical guidance in one's choices. If one combines Hume's theory that reason is always the slave of the passions with Kant's denial of moral

worth to all actions motivated by desires, the outcome would be that no actions can have moral worth. To avoid such moral skepticism, Kant maintained that reason alone can lead to action without the support of desire. Unfortunately, he was unable to explain how this is possible, beyond arguing that it is necessary if the common conception of morality is to make sense. Of course, the fact that the alternative leads to so unpalatable a conclusion may be in itself a powerful incentive to believe that somehow a categorical imperative is possible, but this consideration would not be convincing to anyone not already committed to Kant's view of moral worth. At one point Kant appeared to take a different line. He wrote that the moral law inevitably produces a feeling of reverence or awe. If he meant to say that this feeling then becomes the motivation for obedience, however, he was conceding Hume's point that reason alone is powerless to bring about action. It would also be difficult to accept that anything, even the moral law, can necessarily produce a certain kind of feeling in all rational beings regardless of their psychological constitution. Thus, this approach does not succeed in clarifying Kant's position or rendering it plausible.

Kant gave closer attention to the problem of how his supreme formal principle of morality can provide guidance in concrete situations. One of his examples is as follows. Suppose that a person plans to get some money by promising to pay it back, though he has no intention of keeping his promise. The maxim of such an action might be: "Make false promises when it suits you to do so." Could such a maxim be a universal law? Of course not. The maxim is self-defeating, because if promises were so easily broken, no one would rely on them, and the practice of making promises would cease. For this reason, the moral law would not allow one to carry out such a plan.

Not all situations are so easily decided, however. Another of Kant's examples deals with aiding those in distress. Suppose a person sees someone in distress, whom he could easily help, but refuses to do so. Could such a person will as a universal law the maxim that one should refuse assistance to those in distress? Unlike the case of promising, there is no strict inconsistency in this maxim's being a universal law. Kant, however, says that one cannot will it to be such, because one may someday be in distress oneself, and in that case one would want assistance from others. This type of example is less convincing than the previous one. If the person in question values self-sufficiency so highly that he would rather remain in distress than escape from it through the intervention of another, then Kant's principle would not require him to assist those in distress. In effect, Kant's supreme principle of practical reason can tell one what to do only in those special cases in which willing the maxim of one's action to be a universal law yields a contradiction. Outside this limited range, the moral law that was to apply to all rational beings regardless of their wants and desires cannot provide guidance except by appealing to wants and desires.

Kant does offer alternative formulations of the categorical imperative, one of which appears to provide more substantial guidance than the formulation considered thus far. This formulation is: "So act that you treat humanity in your own person and in the person of everyone else always at the same time as an end and never merely as means." The connection between this formulation and the first one is not entirely clear, but the idea seems to be that, in choosing for oneself, one treats oneself as an end; if, therefore, in accordance with the principle of universal law, one must choose so that all could choose similarly, one must treat everyone else as an end as well. Even if this is valid, however, the application of the principle raises further questions. What is it to treat someone merely as a means? Using a person as a slave is an obvious example; Kant, like Bentham, was making a stand against this kind of inequality while it still flourished as an institution in some parts of the world. But to condemn

slavery one needs only to give equal weight to the interests of slaves, as utilitarians such as Bentham explicitly did. One may wonder, then, whether Kant's principle offers any advantage over utilitarianism. Modern Kantians hold that it does, because they interpret it as denying the legitimacy of sacrificing the rights of one human being in order to benefit others.

One thing that can be said confidently is that Kant was firmly opposed to the utilitarian principle of judging every action by its consequences. His ethics is a deontology (*see* deontological ethics). In other words, the rightness of an action, according to Kant, depends not on its consequences but on whether it accords with a moral rule, one that can be willed to be a universal law. In one essay Kant went so far as to say that it would be wrong for a person to tell a lie even to a would-be murderer who came to his house seeking to kill an innocent person hidden inside. This kind of situation illustrates how difficult it is to remain a strict deontologist when principles may clash. ~~Apparently Kant believed that his principle of universal law required that one never tell lies, but it could also be argued that his principle of treating everyone as an end would necessitate doing everything possible to save the life of an innocent person. Another possibility would be to formulate the maxim of the action with sufficient precision to define the circumstances under which it would be permissible to tell lies—e.g., perhaps there could be a universal law that permitted lying to people who intend to commit murder.~~ Kant did not explore such solutions, however.