

## 0.1 Chapter 6: curriculum: Philosophy

### 0.2 Philosophy

#### 1 Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant is a philosopher who tried to work out how human beings could be good and kind outside of the exhortations and blandishments of traditional religion.

He was born in 1724 in the Baltic city of Königsberg, which at that time was part of Prussia, and now belongs to Russia (renamed Kaliningrad).



Kant's parents were very modest; his father was a saddle maker. Kant never had much money which he dealt with cheerfully by living very modestly. It wasn't until he was in his fifties that he became a fully

salaried professor and attained a moderate degree of prosperity.

His family were deeply religious and very strict. Later in life, Kant did not have any conventional religious belief, but he was acutely aware of how much religion had contributed to his parents ability to cope with all the hardships of their existence and how useful religion could be in fostering social cohesion and community.

Kant was physically very slight, frail and anything but good looking. But he was very sociable and some of his colleagues used to criticise him for going to too many parties.



When eventually he was able to entertain, he had rules about conversation; at the start of a dinner party, he decreed that people should swap stories about what had been happening recently. Then there should be a major phase of reflective discourse, in which those present attempted to clarify an important topic; and finally there should be a closing period of hilarity so that everyone left in a good mood.

He died in 1804, in his eightieth year, in Königsberg having rarely felt the need to spend any time outside the city in which he was born.

Kant was writing at a highly interesting period in history we now know as The Enlightenment. In an essay called *What is Enlightenment* (published in 1784), Kant proposed that the identifying feature of his age was its growing secularism. Intellectually, Kant welcomed the declining belief in Christianity, but in a practical sense, he was also alarmed by it. He was a pessimist about human character and believed that we are by nature intensely prone to corruption.

It was this awareness that led him to what would be his life's project: the desire to replace religious authority with the authority of reason; that is, human intelligence. Kant pursued this grand project in a major series of books with fearsome titles, including:

*The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781)

*Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783)

*The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785)

*The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788)

*The Critique of Judgment* (1793)

In a book on religion titled, *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* (1793), Kant argued that although historical religions had all been wrong in the content of what they had believed, they had latched onto a great need to promote ethical behaviour, which still remained.

It was in this context that Kant came up with the idea for which he is perhaps still most famous: what he called *the Categorical Imperative*. This strange sounding term first appeared in a horrendously named work, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. It states:

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

What did Kant mean by this? This was only a very formal restatement of an idea that had been around for a long time something we meet with in all the main religions: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Kant was offering a handy way of testing the morality of an action or pattern of behaviour by imagining how it would be if it were generally practiced and you were the victim of it.





It might be tempting to flitch a few pads of paper from the stationery cupboard at work. It seems like a small thing. But if everyone did this, the cupboard and society at large would need a lot of guards.

Similarly, if you have an affair and keep it quiet from your partner you might feel its OK. But the Categorical Imperative comes down against this, because you would have to embrace the idea that it would be equally OK for your partner to have affairs and not tell you.

The Categorical Imperative is designed to shift our perspective: to get us to see our own behaviour in less immediately personal terms and thereby recognise some of its limitations.

Kant went on to argue that the core idea of the Categorical Imperative could be stated in another way: Act so as to treat people always as ends in themselves, never as mere means.



This was intended as a replacement for the Christian injunction for universal love: the command to love ones neighbour. To treat a person as an end meant keeping in view that they had a life of their own in which they were seeking happiness and fulfilment, and deserved justice and fair treatment.

The Categorical Imperative Kant argued is the voice of our own rational selves, its what we all truly believe when we are thinking rationally. Its the rule our own intelligence gives us.

Kant extended his thinking about the Categorical Imperative into the political sphere. He believed that the central duty of government was to ensure liberty. But he sensed that there was something wrong with the ordinary definition of freedom. It should not be thought of in *libertarian* terms: as the ability to do whatever we want. We are free only when we act in accordance with our own best natures; we are slaves whenever we are under the rule of our own passions or those of others. As he put it, a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same.

So freedom isnt an absence of government: a free society isnt one that allows people more and more opportunity to do whatever they happen to fancy. Its one that helps everyone become more reasonable. The good state represents the rational element in everyone, it rules according to a universally valid will under which everyone can be free. Government, ideally, is the external, institutionalised version of the best part of ourselves.

It might be a bit surprising at first to discover that in 1793, Kant published a major work on beauty and art: *The Critique of Judgment*. It might seem like a bit of a sideline for a thinker otherwise concerned with



politics and ethics. But Kant held that his ideas about art and beauty were the cornerstones of his entire philosophy.



As we've been seeing, Kant thought that life involved a constant struggle between our better selves and our passions, between duty and pleasure. Beauty Kant especially liked roses, vines, apple trees and birds delights us in a very special and important way. It is a reminder of, and goad to, our better selves. Unlike so much else in our lives, our love of beauty is disinterested. It takes us out of narrow selfish concerns, but in a charming, delightful way without being stern or demanding. The beauty of nature is a continual, quiet and insistent reminder of our common universal being. A pretty flower is just as attractive to the

tired farmworker as to the prince; the graceful flight of a swallow is as lovely to a child as to the most learned professor.

For Kant, the role of art is to embody the most important ethical ideas. Its an extension of philosophy. He held we needed to have art continually before us so as benefit from vivid illustrations and memorable symbols of good behaviour, and thereby keep the wayward parts of ourselves in check.

## **Conclusion**

Kants books were dense, abstract and highly intellectual. But in them he sketched a highly important project that remains crucial to this day. He wanted to understand how the better, more reasonable parts of our nature could be strengthened so as to reliably win out over our inbuilt weaknesses and selfishness. As he saw it, he was engaged in the task of developing a secular, rational version of what religions had (very imperfectly) always attempted to do: help us to be good.