

Kant's Ethics of Duty

What do we owe one another?



George Matthews

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The question of morality is thus:



How can we possibly step back from all of our other concerns and act based only on what is right? Is there even such a thing?



"Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more intensely the mind of thought is drawn to them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me."

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*

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- 1. What are our moral obligations anyway?*
- 2. Why should we try to live up to their demands?*
- 3. How can we go about doing that?*

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But what are these ideals based on?

Philosophical background

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1. What are the nature and limits of **theoretical reason**: *What can I know?*
2. What are the nature and limits of **practical reason**: *What should I do?*
3. How might reason be a guide for a meaningful life: *What may I hope?*

Reason as a guide

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unconditionally

Reason tells us what we *should* think is true in all cases. It tells us what we *should* do no matter what. **Can it really?**

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Kant is skeptical about the ability of our theoretical reason to settle questions about God, the soul or life after death.

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Kant argues that immoral choices are **irrational** choices and *that* is what makes them wrong.

Moral evaluation

motives

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- Next we need to figure out our assumptions about the situation, others' behavior and beliefs.
- To determine whether it is right or wrong, we then see if there are any hidden contradictions between our motives, expectations and assumptions. If there are it makes no sense and we should thus reject it.

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Consider some examples...

Is stealing morally acceptable?

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- If I carry out my plans I will take it from you and become its new owner, enjoying its use as if I got it in any other way.
- But this assumes that you and everyone else respects private property, and won't steal it back from me.
- This means that stealing cannot be right, because it both assumes and undermines private property -- if *everybody* stole things *nobody* could have any reason do to so.

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- But this assumes that you and enough other people value telling the truth, since otherwise my lie wouldn't be believed.

- This means that lying cannot be right, because it both assumes and undermines reliable and truthful communication as a norm -- if *everybody* lied *nobody* could have any reason to do so.

Immoral actions

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- Kant's insight is that all immoral action involves buying into a "double standard" in which we actually accept the rules we are violating and **make an exception for ourselves.**

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Kant's answer:

Acting morally is the only way to truly justify our own choices to ourselves and live lives where we can truly feel *worthy* of whatever happiness we may enjoy.

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- In addition, we also owe it to ourselves to act with self-respect, dignity and in recognition of our own unique value.
- **Rights and duties** go hand in hand since if I have rights, this imposes duties on others to respect these rights.

Some common objections

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- In the real world we may face seemingly impossible situations. In such cases maybe the best we can do is acknowledge and take responsibility for our own wrong-doing and *never* use supposedly good outcomes as an excuse.

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The case of the moral misanthrope.

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- While such a person might follow the letter of the moral law, they would be far from being a complete person, since the *spirit* of humanity is lacking. A tragic or sad case perhaps, but does it really undermine the ideal of morality?

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The case of moral self-deception.

Kant's view of moral decision making assumes that we are all completely honest with ourselves. But are we really like this and don't we all to greater or lesser degrees tolerate a certain amount of hypocrisy in ourselves, thinking of ourselves as "basically good people" even as we treat others poorly and fail to fulfill our moral duties to them?

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- While there are no guarantees that we will *not* deceive ourselves in this way, moral reflection should be considered an ongoing project, not something we can ever assure ourselves we have finished once and for all. Pointing out to us our inconsistencies is what friends, family and counselors are there for, isn't it?



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