



Kant's Designed Ethical Principles: An Overview

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Abstract: The objective of this article is to explore the supreme modern philosopher Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) designed ethical or moral principle whereas he says that man himself is the original maker of all his representations and concepts, and ought to be the soul author of all his actions. This study concentrates on the subject that ethics is fundamentally normative which does not merely describe behavior but evaluates and prescribes ideal conduct of humans. It also stresses that ethical philosophy is concerned with voluntary actions, those freely chosen and carried out through a conscious act of will. The research seeks the three major approaches to normative ethics (deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics), among them; deontological theory connects morality with duty. An action is morally right because of what it is, not because of the outcome it produces. It highlights that Kant's aim was to discover a universal moral principle, i.e. a rule that could guide all moral decisions, regardless of time or place. Thus, the results provide a road to show that the main aim of this work is to investigate and develop the supreme principles of morality which Kant sketched to form a sound and rational society for humans.

Key Words: Categorical imperative, Duty, Ethics, Good will, Morality.

Introduction: We the humans are strange creatures. We create so many problems for ourselves such as rules, expectations, moral codes, obstacles, etc. Think how wonderful life might be without all of that. No rules, no restrictions - just doing whatever you want, whenever you want, without anyone stopping you. Imagine a world with no laws, where you could live like a god, completely free and in charge of your own life. This total freedom sounds like happiness. But without ethics or laws, life wouldn't just be "free", it could become chaotic or even dangerous. If everyone acted only on their desires, without limits, the strong might dominate the weak, and trust or safety would disappear. The ethical philosopher like Kant and many others argue that freedom without responsibility is not true freedom, it becomes mere impulse. On the contrary, the subject matter of ethical philosophy includes social customs, patterns of action, and codes of conduct. So, it is an extraordinary subject, which follows a distinct path, suggesting that life requires principles and appropriate boundaries by which man reaches to a better, fairer world.

Apprehension of Kant's Ethical or Moral Philosophy

Ethical or moral philosophy is a branch of philosophical inquiry that seeks to understand human behavior in terms of ethical conduct. The term 'moral' comes from the Latin *mores*, meaning customary behavior or traditions. And the term 'ethics' is derived from the Greek *ethos* (character), the field deals with the principles guiding human action - what people ought to do, what constitutes good or bad behavior, and what values are worth upholding. According to standard definitions, ethical philosophy critically examines the rightness or wrongness of actions, the virtue or vice of habits, and the standards of morality that determine ethical behavior.¹ It is fundamentally normative which does not merely describe behavior but evaluates and prescribes ideal conduct.

As William Lillie puts this definition in his book *An Introduction to Ethics*, ethical philosophy is: "The normative science of the conduct of human beings living in societies - a science which judges human

behavior to be right or wrong, good or bad, ethical or unethical.”² This definition highlights the evaluative rather than descriptive nature of ethics. It also stresses that ethical philosophy is concerned with voluntary actions, those freely chosen and carried out through a conscious act of will. For instance, a student writing a thesis makes a voluntary decision, while actions like blinking or reflexes are involuntary; and therefore, fall outside ethical judgment.

However, Immanuel Kant categorizes all rational knowledge into two types: material and formal. Material rational knowledge pertains to objects, determining their nature and the laws they follow. In contrast, formal rational knowledge concerns itself with the forms of understanding and reason, and the universal laws of thought regardless of any specific object. Kant identifies formal rational thinking as logic. On the other hand, material rational study is divided into physics and ethics, based on the laws of nature and freedom, respectively. These are often referred to as natural philosophy and moral philosophy.

Logic, being formal philosophy, has no empirical component. However, both natural and moral philosophy include empirical elements. Natural philosophy investigates the laws of nature based on experience, while moral philosophy deals with the laws of human will, especially as influenced by nature. Kant writes,

The former [natural philosophy] concerns laws according to which things actually happen; the latter [ethics], laws according to which things ought to happen. Ethics must also consider the conditions under which what ought to happen often does not.³

So, for Kant, ethics revolves around the laws of the human will and examines the circumstances under which people may fail to act morally. His ethical system aims not only to identify the supreme principle of morality but also to answer the fundamental questions like: “What ought I to do?” Therefore, a central task of Kantian ethics is to establish a reliable standard for determining the moral rightness or wrongness of actions. In ethics, this falls under normative ethics, which focuses on criteria for judging actions as morally right or wrong. It formulates moral rules that directly influence actions, institutions, and lifestyles. Normative ethics explores how people ought to act and typically includes three major approaches: deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics.

Kant’s Moral Philosophy as Rule-Deontological Ethics

Deontology, represented by Kant and others, is the basis of morality on adherence to rules or duties. An action is considered morally right because of its nature, not because of its consequences. Utilitarianism, or teleological ethics, evaluates morality based on the outcomes; specifically, whether the action promotes good or desirable ends. And virtue ethics, traced back to Aristotle and Aquinas, emphasizes the moral character of the individual rather than the rules or outcomes of specific actions.⁴

Within deontological ethics, scholars distinguish between act-deontology and rule-deontology. Act-deontologists argue that moral obligations are context-specific. For instance, one may say, “in this situation, I must not break a promise,” rather than accepting a broad rule like, “one must always keep promises.” Actually, they believe that moral duties cannot be generalized. Instead, we must decide what is right or wrong within the specific context of each individual situation. On the contrary, rule-deontologists, including Kant, maintain that morality is based on universal rules or duties that apply regardless of circumstances. Kant’s ethics exemplifies this view. For Kant, the moral worth of an action lies not in its outcome but in the intention behind it, specifically, the intention to fulfill one’s duty. The consequences are irrelevant. The truly moral person acts out of duty, guided by what Kant calls the categorical imperative: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”⁵ This means that if our action could become a rule that everyone could follow at all times, then it is moral. If not, we have a duty to avoid that action.

The Good Will and Its Connection to Moral Law

If a proposed action can be universally applied without contradiction, it is morally right; otherwise, it should not be performed. This formulation underscores that morality must be universalizable if it cannot be a law for everyone, it is not moral. Kant elaborates on this theory in his foundational work, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.⁶ There, he seeks a purely a priori principle of morality, one independent of empirical conditions. Even if no one tells the truth, it would still be true that they ought to. We cannot determine whether lying is wrong by seeing how many people lie. The principle that truth-telling is right must be valid in itself, without relying on observation or experience. This is what Kant means by a-priori moral principles. It is valid on its own, regardless of human behavior.

Kant begins the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* with this powerful claim that “nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification, except a Good Will.”⁷ This claim interprets that the qualities like intelligence, courage, wit, judgment, wealth, etc. are certainly useful and often seen as positive; but these can become bad if misused. They are only conditionally good, only when paired with a good will. But good will, according to Kant, is intrinsically and unconditionally good. That means, it does not need to be tied to success or results. It is good in itself, simply because of the intention behind it. In this regard, the philosopher C.D. Broad affirms this: “What Kant’s examples prove is that things which are intrinsically good... always contain good will as one element in their make-up.”⁸ So, for Kant, good will is not good because of what it achieves; but because it is grounded in rational principle.

Acting for the Sake of Duty

Moral actions stem from duty, which is determined by reason, not by results. He puts it clearly: “an action cannot be right unless you can give a reason for it.”⁹ Kant insists that morality is not based on desires or inclinations, but rather on the rational recognition of duty. Human beings, unlike divine beings, have conflicting desires, making the idea of duty essential for moral action.

Kant also makes a key distinction between that acts in accordance with duty (doing what is right, but for selfish reasons), and acts for the sake of duty (doing what is right simply because it is right).¹⁰ For example, a shopkeeper might treat customers fairly just to protect his reputation. Though the action aligns with duty, it lacks moral worth because it is not done for the sake of duty. On the other hand, true moral actions, like refusing to lie or choosing not to commit suicide, even in deep grief, simply because one knows these are wrong, are moral acts done for the sake of duty. Even when someone performs an action because he wants to be a good citizen, the action only has moral worth if it is done not for personal pride or social approval, but out of a sincere respect for the moral rule itself. Actually, acts for the sake of duty arise from reverence for the moral law, which commands respect purely because it is rational and universal. In a word, real duty comes from a deep, unselfish respect for moral principles, not from external pressures or internal desires.

Now the phrase ‘respect for the law’ holds deep importance in Kant’s moral philosophy. It means that moral law must be held above everything else, and all human beings are morally bound to obey it. For Kant, such a law should not be personal or change depending on circumstances; it must be universal and consistent. This universality is what gives the law its authority and moral weight.

The Categorical Imperative

This leads Kant to develop the concept of the Categorical Imperative. For Kant, a categorical imperative is a command of reason that applies universally and unconditionally. It tells us what we ought to do, not based on the outcomes we desire, but because the action is right in itself.¹¹ Kant recognizes that human desires and inclinations often distract us from this moral law. But if we put aside those personal impulses and use our practical reason, the moral law becomes clear like the sun emerging from the clouds. This moral law commands our will purely because it is right, and not because of any reward or consequence. That is why Kant calls it a categorical imperative, a law that we must follow simply because it is our duty.

Now he distinguishes the categorical imperative from hypothetical and assertorical imperatives.¹² The hypothetical imperatives apply only under specific conditions and are directed at people who have certain goals or ends. They do not command actions for their own sake, but only as a means to achieve something else (e.g., If you want to learn English, you ought to study grammar and vocabulary). Assertorical imperatives are special kind of hypothetical imperative that deal with ends that almost everyone naturally desires, like happiness (e.g., If you want to be happy, you ought to exercise regularly). Kant calls these “assertorial” imperatives because we can assert, or assume, that most people do in fact seek these ends. The categorical imperative is completely different from the other two. It is not based on any conditions or personal goals. Instead, it commands an action as morally necessary, simply because it is right. So these are unconditional and apply to all rational beings. Kant writes: “I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law.”¹³

This means before acting, we should ask ourselves that everyone acted this way or not. For instance, if someone considers making a false promise to get money, Kant asks: Could this be a universal law? The answer would be no, because if everyone made false promises, no one would believe promises at all. Then the very concept would collapse.

From Kant’s view, three key ideas are clear:

- Every action is guided by a maxim - a personal reason or rule for doing it.
- Moral thinking happens only when we check whether this maxim could be accepted by everyone in a similar situation.
- An action is truly moral only if the personal maxim is in agreement with a universal moral law - one that is valid for all rational beings.¹⁴

If someone acts on a maxim that contradicts this universal law, then according to Kant, the action is morally wrong. Kant argues that all moral decisions must pass the test of universalizability and consistency.

Different Formulations of Categorical Imperative

In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant presents his Categorical Imperative in several formulations, such as:

- i) The Formula of the Law of Nature
- ii) The Formula of Humanity
- iii) The Formula of Autonomy
- iv) The Formula of the Kingdom of Ends

While different in wording, Kant claims all these formulations express the same fundamental moral law.

i) The Formula of the Law of Nature

Kant’s formula of the law of nature says we should act only according to rules (maxims) that we can imagine becoming universal laws of nature. This formula expresses that “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature.”¹⁵ That means, before doing something, we should ask: “What if everyone did this?” If the action would lead to a breakdown of natural or moral order, then it is wrong. For example, a man thinking of ending his life from self-love must ask if this could be a universal rule of nature; but since nature aims to preserve life, such a rule would go against it, making the action morally wrong.

ii) The Formula of Humanity

Kant’s humanity formula says that we must always treat people including ourselves as ends in themselves, not just as tools to achieve something else. It is stated as: “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.”¹⁶ Every person has value just because they are human and rational. This

means we should respect others and not use them for selfish reasons. For example, if someone commits suicide to escape pain, they are using their own life as a means to an end (avoiding suffering). But Kant says that life itself is valuable and must be respected as an end, so this action is morally wrong. Therefore, in Kant's view, to end one's life in pursuit of relief from suffering is to instrumentalize one's own existence, and that violates the moral principle of treating humanity, in every case, as an end in itself. In short, treat every person with dignity, never just as a tool for your own goals.

iii) The Autonomy Formula

Kant expresses autonomy formula in these words: "So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxim."¹⁷ The formula says that we should act in ways that our own will could see as creating a universal law, one that everyone could follow. This means we are not just following rules; we are also making rules through our choices, based on reason. The idea is that every rational person is morally free and has the ability to decide what is right, not because someone else says so, but because they recognize it as a law they would give themselves. Actually, the formula deepens the idea that moral obligation comes from within - from our capacity to legislate universal moral laws through rational thought and will. This is what gives moral law both its authority and its dignity. In a word, we are moral when we freely choose to follow rules that we believe everyone should follow.

iv) The Kingdom of Ends Formula

Kant presents this version of the categorical imperative as follows: "So act as if you were through your maxims a law-making member of a kingdom of ends."¹⁸ The formula says that we should act as if we are creating laws, not just for ourselves, but for a community where everyone is treated as an end in themselves, not as a means to an end. By "kingdom," Kant means a moral society where each person respects others' goals and dignity, and follows laws they would accept for everyone. These laws must treat all people as having inherent worth. Act like you are helping to build a sound world where everyone is respected and follows shared moral rules.

In this way, Kant's various formulations of the categorical imperative offer different perspectives on the same core principle. They are not separate or conflicting ideas, but different ways of expressing the same fundamental moral law. Ultimately, the categorical imperative serves not only as a standard for judging individual moral actions, but also as a guide for how we should relate to others in community. It lays the groundwork for ethical relationships that are essential to establish a rational framework in society.

Criticisms & Counterarguments of Kant's Ethical or Moral Philosophy

There is no doubt that Kant developed a unique and influential model of ethical or moral reasoning based on the concept of the categorical imperative. However, many philosophers have criticized his ethical system from various angles. Critics mainly argue that Kant's moral philosophy is too abstract, unrealistic, and dismissive of human feelings and consequences.¹⁹ The arguments against it are as follows:

- Hegel argues that Kant's system is too abstract and doesn't help with real-life situations. He says Kant gives us a rule (the Categorical Imperative) but not clear moral guidance. For example, helping the poor or lending money can lead to contradictions when universalized, making the system confusing. But Kant's idea of "duty for duty's sake" is meant to be a guiding principle. Just like a math formula doesn't cover every example, but helps to solve all similar problems; thus, Kant's moral rule can be applied to many cases even if not every situation is mentioned.
- Schopenhauer criticizes Kant for being too idealistic. He thinks moral philosophy should deal with real-world situations, not just what should happen in a perfect world. Kant ignores Schopenhauer's claim real-life situations by saying that ethics is not about describing what is, but about guiding what ought to be done. His system is normative (prescriptive), and that is the point of his moral philosophy.

- Critics also say Kant's ethics is too formal and empty. It tells us how to decide what is right (through universal laws), but not what is right in specific cases. It ignores emotions or desires, which are important in real-life decisions.

Against this, Kant comments that relying on emotions can make moral decisions biased. He rightly insists on using reason, not feelings, to ensure fairness and objectivity in moral choices.

- C.D. Broad points out that reason alone is not enough in all moral decisions, for example, choosing a life partner needs emotion too.

With the above counterargument, Kant extends that in everyday life, personal feelings and attachments often distort our moral judgment - making it difficult to remain impartial. For instance, people may overlook the serious faults of a loved one simply because of emotional bias.

- John Stuart Mill, a utilitarian, believes morality is about promoting happiness. He says Kant's moral law actually relies on the outcomes it claims to ignore. Mill believes Kant fails to prove that immoral actions (like lying or stealing) always lead to logical contradictions unless we consider their bad consequences.

In response to Mill's utilitarian it can be said that Mill misunderstood Kant. Kant doesn't say actions are wrong because they lead to bad consequences. Instead, he says that actions like lying or breaking promises are wrong because, if everyone did them, the very idea (like 'promising') would fall apart. That makes such actions self-defeating, not just harmful.

- Deontological ethics, as advocated by Kant, retains its significance and integrity independently of consequentialist theories. Actions done purely for the sake of outcomes such as personal pleasure or external benefit that lack true moral worth in Kant's view. This deontological approach has been held in high esteem by many philosophical traditions throughout history. A notable parallel can be found in the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, where Lord Krishna advises Arjuna to practice Karma Yoga, that is, to perform one's duty without attachment to the results. This is essentially the idea of "duty for duty's sake," a central tenet of Kant's philosophy as well.²⁰

Ultimately, the categorical imperative, as the supreme principle of morality, serves not only to evaluate individual actions but also to help shaping a peaceful society. By adhering to this principle, we can hope to realize the ethical ideal of "duty for duty's sake" in our actual lives, and move closer to establishing what Kant called the "kingdom of ends" - a moral community governed by mutual respect, dignity, and rational will.

Conclusion: Through the ongoing research, we can understand that moral law as an unchanging ideal, serving as the normative standard for ethical actions. Unlike mutable subjective principles or contingent social norms, the moral law is universal and objective, applying equally to all human beings regardless of context. It is distinct from natural and political laws, focusing specifically on guiding human conduct by proscribing unethical actions (e.g., stealing, killing, lying) and promoting positive virtues such as honesty, truthfulness, and social service and many others. Kant's ethics, based on duty and reason, helps to develop a foundational framework for a unified social order where all rational beings are equally dignified. If these followed sincerely, the principle of "duty for duty's sake" can guide us toward a better society.

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