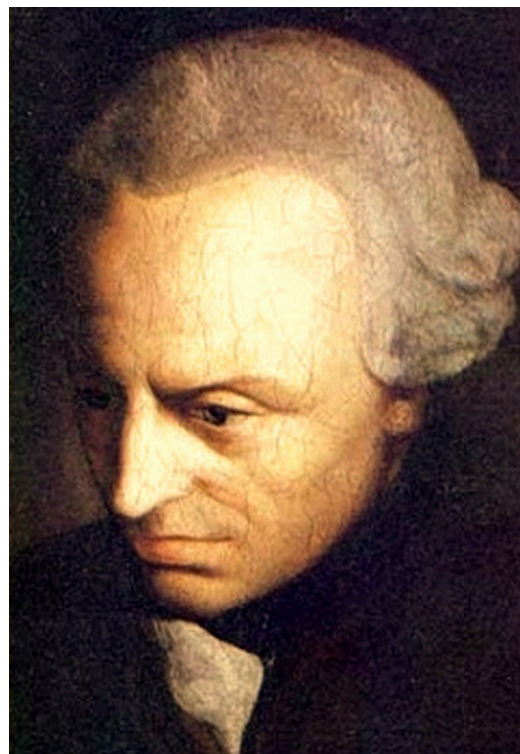


# Kantian Ethics – introduction

## The Sovereignty of Reason

To properly understand Kant's approach to ethics it is necessary to place him in historical context. He was writing in the eighteenth century, the 1700s, a period of history known as the Enlightenment or 'The Age of Reason'. In the previous century it was normal to distinguish between the 'truths according to reason' and the 'truths above reason'. There were some things it was simply wrong to question using human reason. In sixteenth century Europe people were even more suspicious of human reason. However, by 1781 Kant was able to write:

Our age is, to a preeminent degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism all our beliefs must submit. Religion in its holiness, and the state in its majesty, cannot exempt themselves from its tribunal without arousing just suspicion against themselves.



When people talk about the sovereignty of reason they are talking about the claim that reason should be used to criticize all of our beliefs.

Kant believed that we can and should use our reason to work out what is the right thing to do. We shall see that Kant will tell us that things are wrong if they lead to a 'contradiction in conception' or a 'contradiction in the will'. Reason doesn't like contradictions it wants beliefs to be consistent, to hang together without any contradictions. Kant isn't going to give us a list of 'dos and don'ts' he is going to offer a sort of algorithm, a logical test, to see if what we intend to will to come about is logically consistent.

This emphasis on reason means our moral judgments will not be influenced by our inclinations or the kind of character we just happen to have as the result of who we are or how we were brought up.

## The Good Will

Kant says

- The good will is the only thing that is good without qualification, i.e. it is good in all circumstances and does not depend on anything else for its goodness.
- Other things may be good in all sorts of ways but they are not always good and without a good will they can become extremely bad, e.g. bravery might lead a criminal to be more audacious.
- The good will is one that chooses to act in obedience to the moral law irrespective of consequences or any personal preferences or inclinations.

## Duty

Kantian ethics is a form of **deontological** ethics. This simply means that it is a duty-based ethics. The word 'deontological' comes from the Greek word 'deon' meaning duty.

Kant says that the best way to understand what is meant by 'a good will' is to study the concept of duty, for the concept of a good will is contained within the concept of duty. By studying those actions that are done just for duty and nothing else we can discover what motivation, what guiding principle, lies behind a good will.

It is important not to misunderstand this notion of duty. It is not your duty in the everyday sense of the word. It is not your duty as an employee or your duty as a citizen of a country. It is not even your duty to follow particular laws. Rather it is your duty to law itself.

The moral law is not a list like the Ten Commandments but, rather, it is simply how any moral action must hang together. For Kant the moral law within is a bit like the scientific laws that describe the universe. The moral law is just the way things, from a rational point of view, have to be. It is a bit like a pattern against which you can check any action. Your moral duty is to only perform those actions that conform to that pattern, that conform to the moral law.

## Duty versus inclination

For an action to have genuine moral worth it must be done from duty not from self-interest or inclination.

Kant distinguishes **acting according to duty** and **acting out of duty** by describing the actions of a tradesman. He asks us to imagine a tradesman who treats all his customers fairly even the inexperienced ones who he could cheat if he wanted to. Although this is in accordance with duty, it is something he should do, it is also something the tradesman will do out of self-interest so that he will not lose customers. Kant says there is no reason to believe that in this situation the tradesman acted out of duty and the basic principles of honesty. Therefore, the tradesman's actions are, according to Kant, not morally praiseworthy.

Similarly, he says that to preserve one's life is a duty, but everyone also has an immediate inclination to do so. Accordingly, people look after their lives in conformity with duty but not from duty and as such their actions have no moral content.

On the other hand, if someone is in such a bad way that they don't want to go on living but carries on, not from fear or inclination but from duty, then his actions do have moral content.



Likewise, some people are so sympathetic and empathetic towards others that they enjoy making other people happy. Again, even if such actions conform to duty they have no moral value. They are no better than people who seek fame and fortune and in doing so happen to do things that help others. However, if someone doesn't like other people but goes out of their way to help them anyway then their actions have moral worth.

### Comment:

It is possible to read Kant as saying that actions only have moral content when you are acting *against* your inclination or self-interest but a more charitable interpretation is that he has selected particular examples to make the distinction clear and that it is entirely possible to have mixed motives. It is just that in such cases it is difficult to know whether someone's actions have moral worth or not.

Even so some people object to Kant's position and say it is obviously better if you enjoy helping people whereas Kant seems to suggest that your pleasure in helping others doesn't add anything, that there is no moral difference between the person who helps willingly and the person who helps reluctantly.

Similarly, many people would say it is just as important to make a moral judgement about the person as it is to make a moral judgement about the action. Imagine that there are two people; one helps because they want to and the other helps because they want to *and* because it is their duty. According to Kant only the second person's actions have moral worth. Many would say both are good people and that additional factor of acting out of duty doesn't add much at all.

These reactions might misrepresent Kant. It is important to remember that in this context duty means acting in accordance with reason. In a later work, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant says, "The rules for practicing virtue... aim at a frame of mind that is valiant and cheerful in fulfilling its duties... What is not done with pleasure but merely as compulsory service has no inner worth..."

