

Kant

Kant was born in 1724 in what was then the city of Königsberg in Prussia (it is now known as Kaliningrad and is in Russia). His father was a harness maker. It would have been normal practice for Kant to receive an elementary schooling and then to join his father as an apprentice. However, Kant got lucky and his intelligence was noticed. The local schoolmaster arranged for Kant to carry-on with his schooling. Kant was not too pleased: he hated his school days. Still, he did well and managed to win a scholarship to the local university. After he graduated he worked as a freelance tutor for a number years. He wanted to be an academic and eventually secured a post at the local university.

He stayed at the University for the rest of his life, gradually working his way up the ranks. When he became famous he was constantly being offered more prestigious posts elsewhere. He turned them all down. He didn't want to leave Königsberg. In fact, he never left Königsberg his entire life. Literally. He was born there, worked there, and died there. Kant was originally an astronomy lecturer and didn't write his most important works in philosophy until quite late in his life. He seems to have had two separate bursts of ideas, ten years apart. And he wrote them all down in a terrific hurry – for he was worried he'd die before he could commit them to paper (life expectancy was very low in the 18th century). He was more concerned to get the ideas down, than to make them particularly readable or easy to understand. The result: Kant is one of the hardest philosophers to read and understand. Although Kant's writings are notoriously dry and difficult, he was reputedly a great lecturer. As a person he seems to have been perfectly affable although perhaps a bit austere. His home had barely any furnishings and no pictures on the walls apart from one of Rousseau (and that was a gift).

He never left Königsberg and lived a life of fixed routine. He would go for a walk every day at precisely the same time, no matter what the weather (people set their clocks by him). He never married. It took a short while for his greatness as a philosopher to be noticed. But noticed it was, and he became famous in his own lifetime. Kant spent the last 10 years of his life going slowly senile and died of a stroke in 1804; he was 79.

Kant's moral theory

According to Kant, morality consists ultimately of one basic moral principle called the 'Categorical Imperative'. Our basic moral duty is to only act on a maxim that you would will should become a universal law. A 'maxim' is the policy or general principle that characterises your prospective action. For example, imagine you are contemplating lying about your income on a mortgage application (something quite a lot of people do). The maxim of that act might be 'lie whenever doing so will secure you a financial advantage'.

What about willing the maxim as a universal law? What Kant is asking, here, is whether you could rationally will that everyone else have the same policy. In effect, Kant wants you to ask the question: "What if everyone else did that?" But what if everyone acted on that policy? Well, then nobody would trust anyone else. But if nobody trusts anyone else, then lying would cease to be an effective way of securing your end. When you lie on your mortgage application, it just wouldn't be believed. Lies only work against a background in which most people tell the truth most of the time.

Categorical imperatives contrast with hypothetical imperatives. A hypothetical imperative tells you what to do in order to achieve or avoid a certain goal. Thus, examples of hypothetical imperatives are: 'If you want to do well in the interview, don't swear at the interviewers'; 'If you want to make lots of money invest in Mail Order Ice Cream Inc.' The important word is 'if'. Hypothetical imperatives contain 'if'. 'If' you want this then do that. That 'if' word means that the authority of a hypothetical imperative is conditional upon you sharing the goal. If you don't want to do well in the interview, or don't want to make lots of money, then the above hypothetical imperatives have no authority over you.

By contrast, a categorical imperative is an unconditional command. 'Don't swear' is a categorical imperative. Kant thought that morality issues its commands categorically. It commands all rational agents, regardless of what goals they have. If I fail to do my duty you wouldn't allow the excuse that 'I didn't want to'. Why? Well, because my desires are irrelevant. Kant believed in free will. We are not just victims of our circumstances and are not controlled by our desires. We have the power of reason and as such our desires merely present us with options but do not determine our choices.

As far as Kant was concerned to coerce or deceive someone is to treat them as a mere tool – a mere thing – a mere means to an end. It is to deny them their own choice about what to do (either directly, by physically forcing them to do something, or, in cases of deceit, by denying them information such that they cannot make an informed choice).

Actions only have moral worth if they conform to the categorical imperative and were performed precisely because they conformed to the categorical imperative. In other words, your actions have moral worth only if performed out of duty.

Kant's point has nothing to do with 'effort' or overcoming temptation. He isn't saying that your acts only have worth when you struggled to perform them (although it can be tempting to read him this way, and it is a common mistake). His point is one about control, luck, and desert. Kant held that as possessors of 'rational will' we are capable of acting autonomously. However, we only act autonomously when we act according to the moral law, because this is a law that our reason gives to itself (so it is 'our own' law). And that is why our acts only have true worth when performed from duty – for only then are we acting truly autonomously.

Rational will

Unlike other animals, our desires do not determine our actions – we are not victims of our circumstances – rather, our desires merely present us with ‘candidates’ for action. We choose. So our power of reason is our power to deliberate and make decisions on the basis of those deliberations. Because we must employ our reason in making any decision at all (you can’t ‘decide’ without using your reason to make the decision) then we must value our reason.

Because others possess reason too, we recognise their intrinsic worth. You employ your reason to make decisions and pursue ends. Respecting the value of other people’s possession of reason involves agreeing not to make any decision on the basis of any principle that you could not agree to everyone abiding by.

Kant’s view is a simple view insofar as morality has once again been found to consist of just one basic moral principle. However, applying the principle may be rather complicated and may not yield much in the way of guidance.