

**The moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804) is one of the most influential in the western intellectual tradition. Kant accepted the metaphor / model of ‘law’ for understanding the nature of moral obligation. But rather than the moral law being found in a sacred scripture, sacred institutions or other sources of claimed divine revelation, and rather than its being found in Aristotelian essences and purposes, Kant affirmed **“the moral law within.”** Kant held that **reason dictates** the requirements of right / wrong - this “inner moral law.” These requirements of reason constitute our **duties**.

One’s **moral motivation** in doing an action is all-important, thus Kantian ethics is a **deontological** (non-consequentialist) **theory** of ethics. The proper moral motivation for doing our duties is the sense of duty itself. **‘The good will’** is the will motivated by duty and duty alone (“duty for duty’s sake”). Emotions and consequences do not constitute truly moral motives of action.

Kant’s key moral concept was **‘the categorical imperative.’** The form of our moral obligations, Kant held, is ‘categorical’ or absolute. One’s duties are to be done without exception. (For instance, Kant held that one must always tell the truth –even to an inquiring murderer.) Kant offered several differing formulations of the categorical imperative, the two most important being the ‘universalizability principle’ and the ‘means-end principle.’ According to **the universalizability principle**, one must be able to “universalize” the principle (or ‘maxim’) of one’s act in order for that action to qualify as one’s duty. One must be able to will that everyone act on the basis of the principle in question and perform the particular act that is determined by the principle.. (Kant assumed that only principles / maxims that are absolute in nature could be so

universalized - but why?.) According to **the ‘means-end principle,’** one must act towards one’s self and toward others in such a way as never to treat self or others merely a means-to-an end, but always as an “end in itself.” In other words, **respect** the dignity and autonomy of rational beings by never “using” people or treating others as having merely instrumental value, but always treat others as having intrinsic value.

A **strength** of Kantian ethics is its affirmation of **the importance of reason / rationality** for ethics. Reason requires **impartiality and responsibility** to universal principles that apply to self as well as others, and these are important ethical values and virtues affirmed by Kant’s ethics. Kant’s requirement that we **respect** human beings – their dignity and autonomy and one’s own dignity and autonomy - is another strength

A **weakness** of Kantian ethics is its **rationalism**. Emotions and good / bad consequences would seem to be of more importance to the moral status of actions than Kant seems to allow. Thus, **complete rejection of consequences** for judging actions to be morally right /wrong seems to be a mistake and a weakness of his account . Another weakness is Kant’s **absolutism** – that moral actions must “always be done without exception.”

But what happens if two duties- absolutes conflict in a particular decision-situation?

If one duty is acted upon absolutely, the other duty cannot be acted upon and one has failed to perform a duty that is absolute.. How does one choose when there is a conflict between two absolutes?

**The ‘Kantian Perspective’:** autonomy and responsibility  
the priority of inner moral motivation – a ‘good will’  
reality of an inner moral imperative = ethical self-hood  
rationality is important in ethics  
respect for ‘humanity’ / human beings  
consistency - fairness in ethical judgments  
objectivity and universality of ethical rules