

Ethics at a Glance

Kantian Ethics

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is generally credited with much of the foundational thought in the evolution of deontology and deontological perspectives. Kant viewed the ability of human beings to reason as the basis of our status as moral agents. Therefore, Kantian ethics rests on the argument that “morality is grounded in reason, not in tradition, intuition, conscience, emotion, or attitudes such as sympathy” (Beauchamp and Childress 2001). To be fully human is to be a rational being capable of exercising both reason and free will in making decisions and choosing actions.

Kant further believed that since we cannot control the outcome of our actions, the morality of an act cannot depend on the outcome or consequences, but must be judged based on the motive or intent of the actor. A moral action is one that is performed solely for the purpose of meeting a moral obligation, and the action itself can only be judged moral in light of the intention behind it. The actual outcome is not considered morally relevant.

Kant’s test of whether an action meets a moral obligation is referred to as the **categorical imperative**. The basic formulation of this imperative is the test of universalizability, which states that you must act so that the rule or principle guiding your action can be willed to be a universal law. That is, could I take this action in all similar circumstances without being logically inconsistent? For example, telling a lie violates this maxim because you could not logically will that people be free to lie whenever they wanted without rendering the concept of truth useless. Therefore, truth telling becomes an important obligation or duty in this ethical perspective because the truth is one necessary condition for rational analysis.

A second formulation of the imperative, often used in health care, requires that we never treat another person solely as a means to our end. For example, involving people in a risky medical experiment without their knowledge deprives them of their ability to make a rational choice about participation and uses them as a means to some other end. The fact that the knowledge gained from the research might benefit thousands of other people is not relevant in this perspective.

Kant recognizes two general categories of duties. A **perfect duty** is one we must always observe, such as our duty not to needlessly harm another person.

Other duties, such as acting with benevolence, are not required in all circumstances, so they are termed **imperfect duties**.

The primary strengths of Kantian ethics in the health care context are that it prohibits us from using oneself or others solely as means to another end and requires us to be consistent in our moral action. For example, we should not experiment on people solely for the benefit of others; and, if it were wrong to involve one set of subjects in dangerous research without their consent, then it would be wrong to involve any subject in dangerous research without their consent. Some of the weaknesses of a strict Kantian perspective are the absence of any guidelines for dealing with the inevitable conflicts between duties and the lack of recognition that emotion and intuition can play a constructive role in ethical decisions. For example, an absolute duty to tell a patient the truth might cause a patient harm in certain circumstances; therefore the duty to always tell the truth conflicts with the duty to avoid needless harm or injury. Furthermore, human emotion and intuition can be helpful in detecting the potential for harm, and it is probably not realistic or even desirable to completely eliminate these natural abilities from our moral actions.

W. D. Ross, also a deontologist but with a more consequentialist orientation, recognized these shortcomings and proposed a slightly different model of duties. Ross advocated a set of duties that included fidelity, justice, beneficence, and nonmaleficence, among others, and he used the term *prima facie* duties to describe them. **Prima facie**, “at first glance,” simply refers to the duty or obligation that appears to be what I should do without considering any other factors. My actual duty is the real duty, and there is only one morally justified course of action in any situation; however, the **actual duty** may not always be obvious, particularly when duties conflict. Unlike strict Kantian ethics that prohibit the consideration of consequences or related factors other than motive, Ross allows us to consider other factors in determining which *prima facie* duty or duties will achieve the greatest balance of rightness over wrongness. This approach is more likely to avoid unreasonable conclusions that can come from considering some duties as absolute in all circumstances.

For more on Kantian ethics see:

Ethics Updates. Kant and Kantian Ethics.
<http://ethics.sandiego.edu/theories/Kant/>

Garrett, J. (2004). A Simple and Usable (Although Incomplete) Ethical Theory Based on the Ethics of W. D. Ross.
<http://www.wku.edu/~jan.garrett/ethics/rossethc.htm>

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Immanuel Kant.
<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/k/kantmeta.htm#Kant's%20Ethics>

Online Guide to Ethics and Moral Philosophy. Kant's Ethics.
<http://caae.phil.cmu.edu/Cavalier/80130/part1/sect4/Kant.html>

Philosophy Pages. Immanuel Kant.
<http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/kant.htm>