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Immanuel Kant

*(Before reading the following lecture, you should review the RealPlayer presentation for Module Nine, entitled “Kant: The Moral Law Within”)*

## Kant's Ethics of Duty

In the slide show for this module, I reviewed the ideas in Kant familiar from **Modules Three** and **Five**. This helped us get a sketch of Kant's deontological ethics as a whole. We also looked at the origins of this theory in Kant's Pietist religious background as well as the Roman tradition of Stoicism and the Enlightenment context for Kant's intense focus on the power of reason. In addition to looking at Kant's own (admittedly difficult to read) theory here, we will examine two particularly good criticisms of the ethics of duty, both from unusual sources.

### I. Kant: a revolution in ethics?

#### A. BACKGROUND

Please see the **first section** of the lecture for **Module Three** for background on Kant.

#### B. THE ARGUMENT

1. We have already read selections from Kant's ethics that dealt with the importance of obligatory, absolute duties and that defined the “good will” as our intention to do our duty for duty's sake, regardless of what consequences come about as a result. Today we're dealing with two final readings, one in which Kant explains how we use reason to divine what our duties are (and gives some examples), and another in which he explains why telling the truth is an absolute duty. Reading 73, excerpted from Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, is the most technical of all of these.
2. Kant starts by telling us that “*there is only one categorical imperative.*” The categorical imperative (CI) is the supreme principle of right in Kant's moral theory. It is called an *imperative*, because it commands us to do something. It is *categorical* because it commands absolutely and unequivocally, without regard to our needs or desires. Because of these features, the CI is properly considered by Kant as *the moral law*—it is like human-made laws (“Don't speed in construction zones!” “Don't steal!”) in that it makes no exceptions for special circumstances (“I was speeding because my wife was in labor!” “I stole to feed my family!”). But unlike these laws, the CI is *rooted more deeply in morality* because it is itself a dictate of reason (why that is, we'll talk about later). It's also different because it doesn't have *content*—while the human-made laws are *about* speeding and stealing, the categorical imperative isn't *about* anything—it simply dictates the *form of our duties*. Now that we know the significance of the CI, let's talk about

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what it says: “Act according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (p. 274). Need a translation into easier-to-understand-English? How about, “Only act on intentions that everyone and anyone could share.” There are two key terms in Kant’s original version that I translated: *maxim*, which means a principle that you can intend to fulfill (such as “When I have a bit of extra money and someone who is in need approaches me, I’ll give them some”) and *universal law*, which in this context, means, “Could everyone do what you’re proposing to do?” Note Kant said that *there is only one categorical imperative*; he’s right about that, but the supreme principle of morality we’ve discussed here has several different *formulations*. The one at the very beginning of this reading (p. 274) we can call the CI “formulation of duty”; the one at the very end (p. 279, and we’ll talk about it in a bit) we can call the CI “formulation of respect for persons.” Although these formulations look quite different, according to Kant they are supposed to lead us to the very same understanding of our duties (much as the two principles, “Always be honest” and “Never tell a lie” would, if followed to the letter by two different people, lead to the same behavior by both).

3. The categorical imperative is supposed to be a *practical rule*: it allows us to “test” any maxim or intention to act. If our intentions pass this test, they are moral and, more than that, they are a duty. If our intentions do not pass this test, they are immoral and forbidden by duty. The test works like this: it demands that we *universalize* our intention. This is nothing but a fancy term for asking the question, “What if everybody did that?” Kant tests four possible maxims to find out whether they are duties or forbidden by duty; these are only four possibilities out of the many possible things that we can intend, regarding ourselves and others, every day. Here are my versions of the four maxims from pp. 274-275:
  - (1) A person who is in despair and tired of life says, “I would be happier dead than alive, so I intend to kill myself.”
  - (2) A person who needs to borrow money but has no likelihood of paying it back makes this promise, “If I need money, I will promise to pay it back even though I know I will never do so.”
  - (3) A lazy person who enjoys nothing more than sipping pina colodas in her hammock says, “It’s too much trouble to challenge myself with difficult books, college classes and Sudoku. I’ll just do this the rest of my life.”
  - (4) A person of moderate means sees homeless folks begging for charity on the street and, thinking that they have made their own bed, says, “Since there’s no law that makes me help these people, I’ll just keep my money to myself.”

According to Kant, in all four of these cases, it would be morally wrong for the person to act on the maxims in question. This is because in all four cases, the intentions don’t pass the test of the categorical imperative. (1) In the first case, I contradict myself, Kant says, if I both will to do whatever is in my best interests *and* kill myself. Clearly, everyone could *not* kill themselves whenever they felt depressed, or the human race would end in one generation. (2) In the second case, Kant says that while making false promises “*may very well be compatible*

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with [my] whose future welfare" (p. 275), it is not moral. Could everyone make false promises? Think about it: if everyone did, promising itself would mean nothing. No one would ever accept us at our word. Again, there is a contradiction here. (3) In the third case, Kant's argument is not so clear. He needs to apply the categorical imperative to the intention to "let our talents rust," but he seems to sidestep this. After a heartless slur against the "frivolous" South Sea Islanders, Kant says that indolence could not be "a universal law of nature or...it should be implanted in us by a natural instinct" (p. 275). Because most of us want to make something of ourselves, he says, we all have a moral duty to do so. For as "rational beings," we all "necessarily will" that our faculties should be developed. For most of us, self-development is not on the same moral par with lying and suicide—perhaps there is a problem here for Kant. (4) Finally, in the fourth case, Kant again struggles to apply the categorical imperative. It's impossible, Kant said, to think of universal stinginess—a total lack of charitability in society's members—as something like a law of nature. Why is this? When we refuse to help others, we contradict ourselves based on the possibility that we ourselves might one day need the help of others. But this is strange. Surely it's not a contradiction if I say, "I refuse to help the homeless today, and if I'm homeless in the future, I won't see it as anyone's duty to help me." Again, there seems to be a problem here.

4. It is beyond our purposes and abilities here to discuss the problems with cases (3) and (4). But it is possible to classify the different kinds of Kantian duties, along two possible axes (in another work, Kant does this classification for us). We can say that there are duties to ourselves and to others, and we can say that for each of these two kinds, there are duties that we are always beholden to follow (*perfect* duties) and others that, while we need not follow them *all the time*, we are not allowed to *not* do them (*imperfect* duties). Cases (1) and (2) above correspond to two of our perfect duties, one to ourselves and one to others. Cases (3) and (4) correspond to two of our imperfect duties, again to ourselves and others. These duties are laid out along these two axes of distinction below:

Kind of duty	Perfect (we must always do it)	Imperfect (we can choose when to do it)
<b>To whom?</b>		
<b>To ourselves</b>	Preserve your own life (suicide is forbidden)	Improve yourself (couch potatoes are forbidden!)
<b>To others</b>	Always tell the truth (lying is forbidden)	Be charitable to others (stinginess is forbidden)

5. Another way to understand the nature of Kantian duties is in terms of Kant's often-repeated idea that violating a duty is "making an exception for ourselves." Let's take stealing, for example. Kant says that even the person who steals "acknowledge[s] the validity of the categorical imperative," but treats himself or herself as an exception to the duties it specifies. If Earl (from one of my favorite TV shows, *My Name is Earl*) steals a candy bar from the local Winn-Dixie market, he is relying on a general background of trustworthy business that allows

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him to even contemplate stealing. Think about it: if *everyone* (or just lots of people) stole candy bars on a daily basis, they'd end up behind the counter with the cigarettes and the condoms *or* Winn-Dixie would stop carrying them outright. Then who can steal candy bars? No one, not even Earl. Earl knows that his candy kleptomania relies on the hundreds of people who buy candy daily on an honest basis, but he makes an exception to the rules for himself. But why, Kant asks? What makes him so special? Why do the rules hold for everybody but Earl?

6. In the final three pages of the reading (bottom of p. 276-279), Kant goes very abstract on us. Kant feels the need not merely to describe the categorical imperative, but to justify it: where does it come from? Why does it bind us with absolute obligations? These are legitimate questions, but not ones that Kant has easily-comprehensible answers for. For our purposes, it is less important to follow the torturous thread of his argumentation than to note several of his important conclusions:
  - The CI is not derived from a fact about human nature, like Hume's sympathy or Aristotle's "happiness." It holds, however, for all rational beings (and this means there may be non-human rational beings whom it also obligates).
  - Rational creatures are different than non-rational ones because the latter can only ever act according to physical and biological laws of nature. While these laws also apply to us, we are capable of "giving ourselves the moral law." Kant often says that when we are moral, our will "determines itself" according to the categorical imperative. Intriguingly, Kant finds our freedom, as rational beings, in our ability to submit to the moral law within all of us.
  - Our moral worth is greater when we fight against more powerful inclinations and let duty win out (these inclinations or feelings include sympathy for others, remember!) Desires and inclinations *never* contribute to an intention or act being moral; Kant sometimes puts this point in this way: the worth of the good will is based on its freedom from the "merely empirical."
7. On p. 279, Kant enters into a very important discussion that leads us to the second formulation of the categorical imperative, the CI "formulation of respect for persons." He starts like this: "**Now, I say, man and, in general, every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will.**" This core idea of Kantian ethics, that we are (as rational moral agents) not merely "means to an end" (like tools or natural resources) but "ends in ourselves" extends to debates in political theory, applied ethics and human rights. Things that are "means to an end" like tools have only relative worth, Kant says. Their value is found in what they are good for. But moral actors aren't "for" anything. To treat ourselves and others morally is to take this fact into account in all our actions. Traditionally, the two ways in which we treat others without the dignity and respect they morally deserve are through *force* and/or *fraud*. In the first case, we use someone's mind and/or body as a tool to do something for us—this is why Kant is against brainwashing, coercion, and

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violence of all kinds. In the second case, *fraud*, we dishonestly use someone to do our “dirty work” by giving them less than all relevant information about the situation. Clearly, the CI “formulation of duty” tells us not to use force and fraud on others—we have duties forbidding these things. But the CI “formulation of respect for persons” (which reads “**Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only,**” p. 279) reminds us that, beyond our duties, we exist in a community of fellow moral agents who deserve respect and dignity.

8. Reading 74 contributes a special “case study” to our knowledge of Kant’s deontological ethics. French philosopher Benjamin Constant challenges the absolute character of Kantian duties. Constant puts it this way: “The moral principle, ‘It is a duty to tell the truth,’ would make any society impossible if it were taken singly and unconditionally” (p. 280). While there are undoubtedly some Kantian principles whose objectivity is not in question, this one has always caused problems for philosophers, both those who support Kant and those who do not. To give you an idea of the issue, let me put it in a contemporary context. Suppose you have a neighbor who is a gun hobbyist. He loves to collect, care for, and shoot all kinds of rifles and pistols (although he avoids automatic weaponry because he considers them crass reflections of a modern age of mass-production). In any case, your neighbor has two defining characteristics: he is concerned about gun safety, and always keeps his collection unloaded and locked up, but he also has a bit of a temper. So far, you’ve always thought that the good quality balances out the bad one. When he goes on vacation, he asks you to keep his gun locker with the collection safely tucked away inside so that if anyone breaks into his house, they won’t get their hands on the weapons. He makes you promise to give the guns back when he returns. He’s gone for two weeks, and comes back in a one-hundred-percent terrible mood, claiming that his wife “wrecked his vacation.” He seems eager to get his gun collection back, and asks you to honor your promise. What would you do?
9. Kant has an easy answer: keeping your promises is a subspecies of being honest, so just as you should always tell the truth to others, you should always keep your promises and return the collection to your neighbor. Immediately, you can see a problem with this. Even Kant can, at least, formulate the issue: with regard to the person who feels the need to break a promise or tell a lie, “**Is he not in fact bound to tell an untruth, when he is unjustly compelled to make a statement, in order to protect himself or another from a threatened misdeed?**” (p. 280). Yet Kant answers “No,” saying that telling untruths (as is also the case with breaking promises) harms not only the one who is told the lie, but also “duty” and “mankind generally.” The reason for the latter harm is, apparently, that I make it less likely that people will tell the truth, trust each other, and keep promises when I fail to do my duty. For Kant, the potentially tragic and preventable consequences (the death of the neighbor’s wife) don’t even enter into it. Kant even brings the law into the question: “**For instance, if by telling a lie you have prevented murder, you have made yourself legally responsible for all the**

consequences; but if you have held rigorously to the truth, public justice can lay no hand on you, whatever the unforeseen consequences may be" (p. 281). Kant is probably wrong here—there is probably a case in accusing you of being an accessory to murder if you hand the guns back over to your neighbor. But it is Kant's supreme confidence in his moral principles that is fairly chilling here. Does a statement like, "To be truthful (honest) in all declarations, therefore, is a sacred and absolutely commanding decree of reason, limited by no expediency" (p. 281), really excuse us from any responsibility for consequences we not only foresaw, but could have prevented? For my part, I think not, but you may disagree. The next two readings will give you more opportunities to think about this strange yet compelling wrinkle in Kantian ethics.

## II: Langton: what Kant forgot

### A. BACKGROUND

**Rae Langton** is a lecturer in philosophy at Monash University. She wrote her doctoral thesis on Kant for Princeton University, and works in the fields of political philosophy, epistemology, and the history of philosophy (from Singer, p. 401).

### B. THE ARGUMENT

1. Langton's essay in the history of philosophy is unusual and it bears moral lessons on at least two levels: first, it tells us something about Kant apart from his role as an academic philosopher. We may not like what we learn about Kant here; then we have to make the decision about whether or not our assessment of his character bears upon the meaningfulness of his philosophy. Second, it shows us a potentially fatal flaw in Kant's system, a system that when effectively put into practice in the life of a young disciple. helps to destroy it.
2. Maria von Herbert was an Austrian noblewoman who, gripped by Enlightenment fever, was attracted to Kant's moral philosophy and was apparently quite good at it. However, she also had a real problem in that she lied to a man whom she was in love with, with the result that his love for her vanished, and now she is suicidal. She writes to Kant for advice, claiming, "I've read the metaphysic of morals, and the categorical imperative, and it doesn't help a bit. My reason abandons me just when I need it. Answer me, I implore you—or you won't be acting in accordance with your own imperative" (p. 283). What ethical philosopher—what ethical *person*—could ignore such a request for help? Yet Kant's help is of a very strange kind. He writes back several months later, beginning his own letter with compliments and sympathy, but then going on to defend the reticence—the unwillingness to be totally frank—of the young man to whom Maria has promised her heart. "What the honest but reticent man says is true, but not the whole truth. What the dishonest man says is something he knows to be false. Such an assertion is called, in the theory of virtue, a lie. It may be harmless, but it is not on that account innocent. It is a serious violation of a duty to

oneself; it subverts the dignity of humanity in our own person, and attacks the roots of our own thinking.” Kant attacks Maria von Herbert for her own lie, regardless of the details about it, and says that she deserves the reticence of the young man as a result” “As you see, you have sought counsel from a physician who is no flatterer. I speak for your beloved and present him with arguments that justify his having wavered in his affection for you” (pp. 283-284). Clearly, Kant was presented with a plea for help from a young woman who had tried to make up for her own life and was in despair; his only cold comfort was plugging her situation into the categorical imperative.

3. With advice like this, it would have been no surprise if Maria had indeed committed suicide soon after receiving Kant’s reply. Nonetheless, about a year after Kant’s letter, she sent a reply to him more or less ignoring his analysis of her character, but claiming in any case to be a good Kantian herself. “I’m indifferent to everything that doesn’t bear on the categorical imperative, and my transcendental consciousness—although I’m all done with those thoughts too” (p. 285). Maria’s life is not only unfulfilled as a result of dedicating herself to being moral in the Kantian way, it is quite empty. She spends her time, having written off a life with her former love, trying to have a “good will,” making sure that all duties are fulfilled save, perhaps, the one to make herself happy. Yet, as Langton points out, “the moral life is the empty, vegetating life, where one sees at a glance what the moral law requires and simply does it, unhampered by the competing attractions of sin” (p. 286). Clearly, Maria is morbidly pathological and (as we know from the end of the story) still quite suicidal. It seems as though a lobotomized person might be a better candidate for Kantian morality than someone who is concerned with becoming virtuous and fulfilled and helping others. We ought to be disturbed by this—as Langton says, “What Kant fails to see—what Herbert herself fails to see—is that her life constitutes a profound challenge to his philosophy, at least as construed one way” (p. 286). There is an ironic paradox in Kant’s philosophy here, because Kant always said that our intentions have more moral worth if they are the result of a hard-fought battle between duty and our competing inclinations and desires. If I accidentally do my duty, but my real motive was to help myself or my fellow human, that has no moral worth. It would seem as if a life free of inclinations, free of desires and interests other than duty, would be the easiest way to be moral. To Maria, this is life. To Kant, who Langton points out once said we have a “duty of apathy,” (p. 288), perhaps this is okay. But to most of us, I suspect this conclusion seems profoundly perverse.
4. In the last two sections of her essay (pp. 290 ff) Langton shows us how Kant’s final communications regarding Maria von Herbert show him to be less interested in her as an end-in-herself and more of the traditional male **misogynist** of his times. Maria’s situation no longer represents a thorny moral situation but a “curious mental derangement.” Was it that Maria’s loss of a perfect love drove her to depression and suicide? Or were these the result of trying to reconcile that loss, deserved as the result of her lie according to Kant, with the systematically stringent dictates of the Prussian philosopher’s ethics? Not only does Kant forget the duty of respect toward Maria, Langton points out in these pages, but he was



incapable of even simple friendship toward her, since friendship on virtually anyone's definition requires both honesty and dishonesty (remember this the next time a friend asks, "Do I look fat in this?" or someone invites you to compliment their "cooking"). To have maintained her relationship with her lover and not have reduced herself to the status of a "thing," to be respected by no one (even Kant!), Maria may have the duty to lie and keep her lie covered to the man she loved, completely contrary to what Kant said. At least, this is Langton's conclusion when she considers whether it may be necessary to sometimes act "strategically" in order to treat ourselves and others as ends, in a "Kingdom of Ends." Langton concludes this tragic tale of the enormous influence of one moral philosopher and his missed opportunity to affect one person's life positively: "[Kant] thinks we should act as if the Kingdom of Ends is with us now. He thinks we should rely on God to make it all right in the end. But God will not make it right in the end. And the Kingdom of Ends is not with us now. Perhaps we should do what we can to bring it about" (p. 294).

### III. Bennett: the conscience of Huckleberry Finn

#### A. BACKGROUND

**Jonathan Bennett** teaches philosophy at Syracuse University. He has written books on early modern philosophy, the philosophy of mind and language, and metaphysics (from Singer, p. 397).

#### B. THE ARGUMENT

1. Bennett's essay is "contemporary classic" in moral philosophy that is well worth your attention. On top of this, it was originally delivered as a lecture in our own back yard at WSU in Pullman! Bennett's purpose is to give us a warning regarding systems of morality, both theoretical and practical, which rely on absolute principles or moral standards. Although Kant is not mentioned in the piece, he is a clear target here, since Kant believed that there were certain things that it is always wrong to do. Perhaps some of Kant's principles—like "Do not murder"—are truly inviolable. With others—like "Never lie"—we might worry that worse consequences would come about as a result of observing the principles than if we violated them. Bennett's inquiry into literature, history and morality is described by him as a foray into "...the relationship between *sympathy* on the one hand and *bad morality* on the other" (p. 295). Bad morality he defines as principles or rules for action which he disapproves of, and thinks you and many others would disapprove of, too. The examples he gives uses are the pro-slavery conscientiousness of Huckleberry Finn, Heinrich Himmler's genocidal anti-Semitism, and Jonathan Edwards' theological **misanthropy**, or hatred of humanity. To this list, we might add Kant's "principled" responses to Maria von Herbert and his disrespect for her dignity. *Sympathy* is defined by Bennett as feelings that impel us to help others, feelings that should not be confused with

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moral judgments. Sympathy and morality often come into conflict, as Bennett explains, with a variety of different results.

2. They can conflict in a way in which sympathy wins out, as the example of Huck and Jim the escaped slave shows. Mark Twain, the author of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, was anti-slavery and intended to show how slavery might be “bad morality” through Huck’s interior dilemma about whether to turn Jim in or not. What’s interesting, though, is how the conflict is settled between Huck’s “fellow-feeling” for Jim as another person, just like him, and Huck’s conscience, which tells him that he is, in effect, stealing Jim from his rightful owners. Not only does Huck leave Jim be simply by weakness of will—he doesn’t decide to help him, he simply gives up the battle. Also, Huck decides to become a relativist about morality, thinking, “It don’t make no difference whether you do right or wrong, a person’s conscience ain’t got no sense, and just goes for him *anyway*” (p. 303). We recognize that Huck is dealing with a thorny dilemma—to help a friend who is also a slave, or do right by the slave’s owner. What is just as unsatisfactory to Huck as it sometimes is to us is that a system of absolute moral principles might come in, sweep the entire problem under the carpet, and settle it in the name of “reason” or “conscience.” For me, your instructor, this has always been what is deeply troubling about soldiers who have claimed, amidst charges that they did something immoral in battle or in an occupation (here the current examples are Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay prisons), that they were “only following orders.” Since when does this excuse give us a moral holiday? Huck decides to take such a holiday, and we may wish him luck.
3. Another way to settle the conflict is to acknowledge the struggle between sympathy and moral principles, then decide in favor of morality, as Heinrich Himmler did. Himmler, as head of Hitler’s SS, does two things that rankle Bennett (and should rankle us): he discounts the natural sympathy that his men have for the Jewish victims of the Holocaust as “weak” and contrary to the proud “Aryan mission” of the German people, and he does this in the name of what we can all agree is a bad morality. Bennett thinks that Himmler clearly has a morality, a set of principles guiding moral judgments—Himmler is consistent, predictable, obeys his superiors and justifies his actions, and in that respect, is trustworthy and honorable. But the morality of the architects of the Holocaust is clearly despicable, and is it one that could have been trumped, and perhaps was in many cases mitigated by sympathy (as shown, for example, in the excellent film *Schindler’s List*).
4. A third way to settle the conflict is Puritan preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards’ way. According to Bennett’s understanding of Edwards, he never really admitted there was a conflict at all because he never showed even a sign of sympathy for the congregations to whom he preached “hellfire and damnation.” Indeed, it’s difficult to read Edwards without wondering how the man could so consistently embrace the image of a powerful God exercising His wrath at His whim upon a human population seen as little more than contemptible sinners. Bennett thinks that Edwards was a misanthropist; for our purposes, it is enough to say that Edwards is not a moral example who most of us would want to be like.

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5. Clearly Bennett is speaking to us in praise of our human sympathies, which you will remember Hume and Rousseau claiming as the roots of our moral life. Kant dismisses our sympathies together with desires and other inclinations as having no moral worth; as I alluded, perhaps Kant belongs with Himmler and Edwards. But even Bennett does not believe that sympathetic feelings can *replace* moral principles. "...[M]oral principles are good to have," he says, "because they help to protect one from acting badly at moments when one's sympathies happen to be in abeyance. On the highest possible estimate of the role one's sympathies should have, one can still allow for principles as embodiments of one's best feelings, one's broadest and keenest sympathies" (p. 303). Moral principles may have the power they have because of, and not spite of, our feelings for one another.

**C. Module 9 Writing Assignment (5 points)**

1. For Kant, any conflict between our "perfect" duties (see p. 3 above) is only apparent. When I face, for example, a situation in which I must both tell the truth *and* endanger the life of another, I do not face a genuine conflict of duties; in fact, according to Kant, I have misunderstood the situation that I am in. Assuming there are genuine conflicts of duties saying that we must do both A and not-A, what ethical tools should we use to resolve them? Discuss the question through a hypothetical scenario that involves a difficult conflict of duties.



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