

Ethics Theory: Kant's Categorical Imperative

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In the eyes of Immanuel Kant, ethical conduct does not lie in moral choice based in desire and feeling, but rather in reason and absolutes. His idea of categorical imperative describes the ideals of ethical conduct to be “supreme principles that everyone should follow in all areas of life. [...] People should follow, or create, maxims that they trust all reasonable people would follow” (Peck & Reel, 2017, p. 10). This theory elevates universal ideas of right and wrong to discourage anyone from ever deviating from the moral path. Though I believe universal laws of goodness should be generally adhered to, the absolute nature of the Categorical Imperative makes it a flawed theory that can not be applied perfectly to every situation.

Kant’s theory is primarily based in logic and reasoning. Though he believed that everyone had their own desires, those who had been educated in basic moral principles had the “capacity to reason, and reason should always come before desire” (Peck & Reel, 2017, p. 10). He felt that ethical decisions should always be made based on these universal moral laws regardless of context or individual desire. According to an article on the theory, “Kant characterized the CI as an objective, rationally necessary and unconditional principle that we must always follow despite any natural desires or inclinations we may have to the contrary. All specific moral requirements, according to Kant, are justified by this principle, which means that all immoral actions are irrational because they violate the CI” (Johnson & Cureton, 2016). For example, if someone is a journalist and he feels it is acceptable to lie to someone in one specific situation during his job, he thus deems lying to be an acceptable act for journalists to partake in, according to the Categorical Imperative. The belief that lying is wrong would be a maxim, or universal rule, that journalists uphold, and under Kant’s theory, should never be broken under any circumstance. Kant’s theory of the Categorical Imperative says that all people are created equal, which therefore accentuates the importance and value of all people, and the importance of

not “dirtying hands” by harming another individual. Even if adhering to a maxim of honesty, not killing, etc. endangers or causes the harm of another group or individual, the maxim should never be broken in order to maintain the ethical standard. In this theory, order is maintained by lawfulness, and to deviate from the accepted laws ultimately causes more harm than good.

While the theory makes many strong points, its absolute nature makes it so that it cannot be applied to every situation in a way that is always ethical. The theory paints every scenario as black and white, with one right answer and many wrong answers, when most situations may have ethical solutions that are more up to interpretation or dependent on context. Even with the use of reasoning and the hope to uphold universal laws of morality, many situations call for breaches in this moral code for the sake of a greater good. John Stuart Mill's principle of Utilitarianism addresses this concept. Utilitarianism calls for people to make decisions that result in the most good for the greatest number of people, or “that the morally right action is the action that produces the most good” (Driver, 2014), regardless of universal moral laws or the expense of the few who do not benefit from this type of moral choice. In general with utilitarianism, “morality depends on balancing the beneficial and harmful consequences of conduct” (Peck & Reel, 2017, P. 11). Mill also argued that quality, not just quantity, played an important role in deciding who or what benefits from a decision. According to Mill (1863), “It would be absurd that...the estimation of pleasure should be supposed to depend on quantity alone” (p. 2). For example, if someone walks into a room where some criminals are holding up ten people at gunpoint, but the criminals say they will let everyone go if that person chooses to shoot one of the hostages, a utilitarian would shoot the one person to save the most people, but also the innocent, “good” people. Their hands would be dirtied by the one death, but they would have saved nine other people. A utilitarian would likely even argue that choosing to not shoot the

one person would make them responsible for the deaths of ten people because they did not do anything to save more people when they could have. On the other hand, a follower of Kant's theory would not choose to shoot the one person and therefore the ten people would probably be killed by the criminals. Because killing is generally a universal immorality, it would be wrong to kill anyone, even if it saved nine other people. Dirtying hands in any way would be an act of immorality, therefore standing by would only lay guilt on those doing the immoral actions: the criminals holding the hostages.

The discrepancy between Utilitarianism and Kant's Categorical Imperative is significant; they are opposite in their interpretation of ethical action. The two theories are two extremes in themselves - black and white - when the truth lies in a gray area. In order to improve upon Kant's theory, and therefore Mill's Utilitarianism also, ethical dilemmas should be viewed through the lens of both, and the solution chosen based on context. The Categorical Imperative rigidly rejects any action generally considered unlawful or immoral. If the theory allowed for exceptions in certain extreme contexts, I believe that it would be more appropriate for use. In the same manner, if Utilitarianism was a little less interpretive and rather based upon something other than the whims of the user, like a universal law, it could also be improved upon. Ethical decision making, in my opinion, would lie somewhere in the middle of the spectrum flanked on either end by these two theories: following the universally accepted morals in as many situations as possible, but allowing oneself to consider all courses of action in ethical dilemmas and choosing what is best depending on the context, even if that means doing something generally considered immoral. Another philosopher, W. D. Ross, provides support of this idea. In his book, *The Right and the Good*, he said that we "should not in general consider it justifiable to kill one person in order to keep another alive, or to steal from one in order to give aims to another" (p. 22). Ross's ideas are

against the utilitarian ideals of doing whatever seems right on a whim, but also do not completely reject the idea of going against accepted laws in some situations. According to Ross, we “should not in general” break these rules, but according to his ideas of the importance of beneficence, we also have the duty to do good for others, which is often up to the context of a given situation.

In conclusion, Kant’s theory of the categorical imperative is a strong theory, but contains significant flaws. It introduces the importance of legality and order that is agreed upon by a majority in society, yet the emphasis on that importance is too strong. A set of well thought out rules is good, but even good rules are made to be broken in some situations. Due to the theory’s absolute adherence to these universal laws, it is not able to be applied as the most ethical course of action in every situation. Sometimes people must deviate from the set path to reach their ultimate destination: ethical conduct.

References

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