

# **Dr. James S. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 5, Kantian Ethics**

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This is Dr. James S. Spiegel in his teaching on Christian Ethics. This is session 5, Kantian Ethics.

Okay, now we're going to talk about Kantian ethics as we continue our survey of major moral theories.

Kant actually lived his entire life in the city of Königsberg, Prussia, and he's one of the all-time great philosophers. I'm sometimes asked who the greatest philosophers in history are, and the big three, as far as I'm concerned, are Kant, Plato, and Aristotle. Plato and Aristotle, of course, are the towering figures that loom over the history of Western philosophy, particularly through their influence of Augustine and Aquinas, and they launched so many of these discussions in Western philosophy.

By the time you get to Kant, you've got 2,000 years of intervening philosophical history. Who can do anything original by then? Kant did do a lot of original thinking in multiple areas, especially epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, and political philosophy. He gave us the idea of a League of Nations, actually, a little essay he wrote called Perpetual Peace.

If that's all he had ever done, he'd still have gone down in history, but he did landmark work in those other areas as well. He's a major figure who represented the Enlightenment. In fact, he wrote a short essay called What Enlightenment is, which was very influential.

One of his aims was to place ethics on a firm philosophical foundation, and he wanted to show that you really don't need any kind of church authority or special revelation from God to know the good and that your basic duties can be rationally discovered. That's a controversial claim, but that was part of Kant's agenda as a leading Enlightenment philosopher. Specifically, what he was trying to do in the realm of ethics was not just to place ethics on a firm rational foundation but also to overcome the problems of consequentialist moral theories like utilitarianism, which define right and wrong, good and bad, always in terms of consequences.

For the utilitarian, there really isn't any attention to motives. It's all about the actual consequences of the acts that you perform that matter, regardless of your intentions or your motives. Kant thought that, in fact, they'd got it backward.

Really, the most important thing of all is the reason for which you act. Your motivating ground for your action is really decisive when it comes to deciding

whether your choices are right or wrong, good or bad. In order to do this, he recognized that it's necessary to find a supreme moral principle that governs everything you think and do and choose as a moral agent.

That supreme moral principle, Kant thought, must be universal. It needs to be such that it applies to every rational being, and it must be necessary in a logical sense. It must bind us, every rational being, such that to be a rational thinker about moral matters, you must recognize the basic duties and obligations that you have.

If you're fully rational, you will get this. He thought that whatever the supreme moral principle is, it needs to be as binding as the law of non-contradiction and logic, where to be rational is to recognize your moral duties just as you recognize your logical duties to think in a consistent way and not contradict yourself. He starts by asking the question, what is the only unqualified good that we can know as human beings? The only unqualified good, something that's good without exception, without any qualification, and that, he says, is goodwill.

A good will. A good will is one that acts out of a sense of duty rather than just desire or natural inclination. You know, we have all sorts of inclinations and desires that we experience throughout a given day that we don't act on.

Others we do act on, but there's also duty, the sense of duty or obligation, which we often sense as well. And that we should be always acting on, regardless of our inclinations and desires. And this is because our moral duties are a subset of our rational duties.

Again, to be rational is also to be moral if we're being rigorous here. So our duties, our moral duties, are dictated by reason itself, every bit as much as reason dictates our logical duties, you might say. So here is Kant's basic approach.

He believes that human beings are inherently rational. That's what it means to be human is to be a rational animal, to be the kind of mammal that reasons, that thinks logically, that looks for evidence for the things that we believe and is compelled by evidence. Good reasons to behave the way that we're supposed to behave.

Morality is a subset of rationality. Again, if you're a truly rational person, then you will recognize your moral duties. Kant makes a kind of parallel between two domains of reason, one of which is theoretical reason and the other is practical reason.

So, theoretical reason is that domain or application of reason that aims for truth. We want to know what is true. We all seek truth.

Whether or not we call ourselves philosophers or scholars, everyone is interested in truth. That's just because of your nature as a being. And what is it that's your

ultimate guide when it comes to the search for truth? It's the law of non-contradiction.

That's the ultimate law or principle of logic that says, whatever else you do, do not contradict yourself. If you're caught in a contradiction, if someone says, ah, you've contradicted yourself, the one thing you will not do is say, yeah, so what? If someone catches you in a contradiction, the first thing you do is, no, no, no, no, you deny it. You say, here's why I'm not contradicting myself.

You might defend yourself with a distinction, or you might defend yourself by saying you misunderstood what I said. Let me clarify. But you're going to defend yourself against that charge of contradicting yourself because that is the cardinal sin in the domain of reason and logic.

Do not contradict yourself. So, the law of non-contradiction is our ultimate guide when it comes to seeking truth. Do not affirm and deny one and the same thing.

Now, practical reason is the domain of rational inquiry where reason applies to conduct. When it comes to practical reason, we're trying to figure out not what's true but how we ought to choose, how we ought to conduct ourselves, and how our will should operate. What should I will? Theoretical reason tells me what I should think and believe.

Practically, I'm concerned with what I should choose and how I should exercise my volition. And this, too, is guided by an ultimate principle that's parallel to the law of non-contradiction. And that's an ultimate imperative.

A principle of reason that guides how we should choose and conduct ourselves. This, too, is an objective law of reason. This is what Kant wants to discover: this imperative or mandate that is universal, this supreme moral principle.

So, here's to fill out the parallels here in the domain of theoretical reason. We're searching for truth. Practical reason pertains to conduct.

Theoretical reason is guided by the law of non-contradiction. Practical reason is guided by this ultimate imperative, which he calls the categorical imperative. And theoretical reason discovers the law of non-contradiction by reason alone.

The law of non-contradiction, likewise, which governs practical reason and conduct, is discovered by reason alone as well, according to Kant. So, all we need, really all we need, in order to know at least our most basic duties in ethics is reason. And that's very much an Enlightenment idea.

The Enlightenment thinkers threw off religious authority and church authority. We don't need any ecclesial or ecclesiastical guidance. We don't need a special revelation.

Reason alone is sufficient for us to be able to discover all the truth we need, acquire all the knowledge we need, and conduct ourselves responsibly, according to the Enlightenment worldview. Again, Kant was a major thinker and prophet of the Enlightenment. Okay, so let's talk about the categorical imperative.

What is the categorical imperative? As it turns out, there are multiple ways this can be expressed and articulated—a number of different angles of approach. We'll talk about we'll talk about a couple of these.

One of these versions of the categorical imperative has to do with what we can universalize, what we can will universally. Because the categorical imperative is a lot like the law of non-contradiction, it mandates that you not contradict yourself in your will. Just as the law of non-contradiction says, you should never think or believe something that contradicts something else that you think or believe.

The categorical imperative says you should never will something that contradicts your own will. Okay, so avoid contradiction. As it applies in theoretical reason to what you believe, the categorical imperative says you should not ever have a contradiction within your will.

So this first version of the categorical imperative says to act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. Kant illustrates his theory with a number of different examples. And one of them is that of the false promise.

If you're considering making a promise that you know you cannot fulfill in order to avoid a certain problem, should you do it? If you're thinking you are not going to have enough money to pay for college tuition this semester, you have a good friend who's got enough money, or they could loan you, say, a few thousand dollars. Should you ask them for that money? I'm alone. Say, I'll pay you back at the end of the semester, knowing that you can't do that. You're not going to have the resources to pay them back at the end of the semester.

Should you do that? What would Kant say? The first categorical imperative says to always act on that maxim where you can at the same time make it become a universal law. Well, could you allow it to be a universal law that everybody makes false promises? Would you like it? Would you desire it? Could you will it that people make false promises to you from time to time or every day? No, we don't want people making false promises to us. So, I can't out of consistency, out of respect for

the moral law, the categorical imperative, which demands consistency in my will, I can't do that.

I can't will something that I don't want to be done, you know, universally. So, since I can't will that to be a universal law, then I shouldn't do it. And he uses other examples as well.

Should I shirk the development of a certain talent that I have that's very special and could be helpful to humanity? Should I give charitably or help at all other people who are in need? Should I commit suicide if I'm in an especially despondent state? And Kant applies the categorical imperative to all those cases, finding that you should develop your significant talents. You shouldn't be a hermit. You should be charitable and helpful towards others who are in need.

You should not divorce yourself from the rest of humanity. And you should never kill yourself. That is always wrong.

In each case, you'd be violating this first version of the categorical imperative if you did any of those things. There's another way to unpack this categorical imperative.

And that is to ask some questions about what it means to be a rational being. He argues that every rational being exists as an end in him or herself, valuable for their own sake, not merely as a means to be used by other people.

What it means to be a rational agent is that you deserve respect simply for who you are. You should not be used as a mere means. And so it goes for all rational agents.

They are not merely means; they are ends in themselves. That is what prompted Kant to discover the second version of the categorical imperative. Which says, 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.

Another way of putting this is to say we should not just use people. Have you ever had someone say to you that you're just using me? If someone said that to you, you would say, no, I'm not. You would deny that.

Again, anybody who has any kind of moral common sense recognizes you shouldn't just use people. And if you're accused of that, either you need to repent of it and apologize or show how, in fact, you really were not guilty of just using someone. Never treat people as mere means.

That is a violation of their dignity as a person. And it does not properly respect their autonomy. The first version of the categorical imperative has to do, therefore, with universalizability.

Can you universalize a given maxim or rule to act as a universal law? The second version has to do with respect for persons and personal autonomy. But Kant is convinced, all Kantians are convinced, that the various versions of the categorical imperative, and there are two others that we're not going to talk about, but that all four versions of the categorical imperative that Kant discusses lead to the same conclusions regarding practical moral issues. We talked about one of his four illustrations, that of the false promise.

How does that work, or how should we analyze that under the second version of the categorical imperative? If I make a false promise to you so that I can get a few thousand dollars from you, so I can go to school this semester, and then tell you that I'll pay you back at the end of the semester even though I know I can't do it, that's a classic example of using you as a means, a mere means to my end. So, the second version of the categorical imperative would be just as emphatic as the first one in declaring that you should not make that false promise. And so it goes, for any question whatsoever regarding conduct or morality, whatever one version of the categorical imperative condemns, all the others will.

And what one permits, all the others will. So that's the categorical imperative in two different formulations, and it's quite ingenious, whatever else you think about Kant and his moral theory, to come up with a theory that at least makes a decent stab at placing ethics on a purely rational foundation. That's impressive.

The question is, does he succeed? Is this really sufficient to guide our entire moral life? Among the strengths of Kant's theory, it certainly places a strong emphasis on duty and obligation. It's a very deontological theory. We've looked at Mill in his utilitarian theory, Bentham, Mill.

Theirs is a consequentialist theory. Kant's is the opposite of that. He says that whatever the consequences, there's right and there's wrong, and we can know independently of consequences.

So, it's a very deontological theory. And it's good, isn't it? Insofar as it places an adequate emphasis on duty. Any moral theory, we would say, from a Christian standpoint, I think we can all agree, needs to make adequate sense of our concepts of duty and obligation.

His theory is also universal in its objectiveness. That's good, right? If it is a matter of moral common sense that there are certain, at least some universal duties, and there's some objective truth and ethics, the fact that a theory like Kant affirms that is a mark in its favor. And finally, it gives an adequate or at least a decent account of justice.

And giving to each its due. We could talk about various ways in which that's the case, but that's the general kind of judgment regarding Kant's theory. And the fact that it's so deontological in its orientation, you know, accounts for that, that he can make sense of justice in a way that the utilitarians cannot.

Because they're so, you know, consequentialist in their thinking. But there are problems with Kant's theory. So, let's consider some of these.

One major objection to Kantian ethics is that it places too much emphasis on duty. The idea is that in order for any action, any choice that we make, to be morally appropriate or respectable, it needs to be grounded in a sense of duty. Isn't that a bit strong? In fact, too strong.

Too demanding. So, let me illustrate this. Suppose you have a friend who's been injured in a car accident.

And you decide you're going to visit this person in the hospital. And you're a good Kantian. And you're considering your schedule.

You've got a busy week. Actually, you don't have much time to go visit your friend. But out of a sense of duty, since they're your friend, you say, I should go visit them.

And so you go, you visit them. And you show up in their hospital room. Hey there, Bill.

Heard you had this accident. I thought I'd just come and visit you and see how you're doing. And your friend Bill says, wow, thank you.

That's so kind of you that you would think of me and take time out of your schedule to do this. That's just very nice. I appreciate it.

And then, as a good Kantian, you say, well, actually, I didn't want to. I was not really inclined in this direction. But I felt it was the right thing to do.

I actually ran the categorical imperative through my mind and decided, yeah, I can universalize this. And I don't want to treat you as a mere means. So here I am, and everything is okay.

At that point, Bill says, what? You didn't want to come visit me? Actually, no, but I felt it was the right thing to do. Your friend is probably going to say, well, you know, thanks, but no thanks. I thought you came here out of a sincere concern for me, which is what we value most, isn't it? We don't want people just acting out of a sense of duty.

As important as duty is, right? Of course, it's a significant thing, as well as duty, obligation, and so on. But we prefer that people act out of a sense of sincere desire and inclination. And the feeling of affection for us to motivate them to do things for us like that.

Visiting us when we're in the hospital, reaching out to us at other times of need, or just spending time with us, period. So, this degree of emphasis that you find in Kant's moral theory is that as much as duty is important in moral life, it's not the whole story. It really looks like Kant treats duty and obligation as if they are the whole moral story.

And that, according to most critics of Kant's theory, constitutes a real weakness. Then, there's this further problem of conflicts of duty that we run into when applying the categorical imperative. So here's a classic example of what you do as someone who's harboring Jews during the Second World War, and the Gestapo comes to the door.

Are you harboring Jews? What do you do? Do you tell them the truth, or do you lie? Do you lie to save the innocent Jewish lives that are in your cellar? Or do you tell the Gestapo the truth, and then all those innocent people die? Truth-telling is an important value. And so is saving innocent lives. Actually, as Kant deals with this one, he ends up siding with telling the truth in every case.

He's unyielding on that, which is, that's a problem in itself regarding Kant's theory, or at least his way of working it out. Most of us would say, well, yeah, just lie. Save the innocent lives and, you know, you mislead the Gestapo, and you take blood off their hands, and you save these lives.

That wasn't Kant's view. But that's kind of a classic dilemma, a moral dilemma. But there are plenty of other cases in ethics where you have two significant values.

They're at odds with one another. And what do we do in that case? When the categorical imperative seems to point in two different directions at the same time, that's a problem. Defenders of Kant's theory would say, well, that's a problem for any theory.

But is it really? And the utilitarian theory seems like, in cases like this, when it comes to responding to the Nazis, you can tally up pretty clearly what is going to produce the most pain or the most pleasure between the various options. It seems pretty clear that if you lie to the Nazis, that's going to lead to consequences that involve much more pleasure and less pain than if you tell them the truth. So, the utilitarian has no problem there.



But boy, the Kantian does. Kant simply dogmatically affirms that we should always just tell the truth in any case, but that doesn't really solve the problem because it isn't so clear on the categorical imperative whether that is the right choice to make since we also have a duty to protect life, as well as a duty to tell the truth. So I do think this is a real problem with Kant's theory.

So even if it represents certain advances, improvements on a consequentialist theory, you've got some liabilities here that are pretty significant. Finally, there's this criticism having to do with the ambiguity of the maxim that we're testing with the categorical imperative. Remember the categorical imperative? If we go with the first version of universalizability, it says only act on that maxim or basic rule for acting, which you could at the same time will to be a universal law.

That's why I shouldn't make the false promise. That's why I shouldn't steal your book. That's why I shouldn't cheat on my taxes.

I can't will those maxims to be universal laws. But notice that we could, one could consistently universalize a very specific maxim to say, steal my neighbor's book when I have no other means of paying for the book and the neighbor I'm stealing from has enough resources they're really not going to miss it that much. It seems like we could universalize that.

Then, I wouldn't have to worry about anybody stealing from me in that similar circumstance because I don't have those sorts of resources. And it would be rare in any case. It would be much rarer than people just stealing books whenever they feel like it.

So, we've specified that maxim. We've made it so specific. It's only going to be in very special circumstances that anybody steals a book, and I'm not going to have to really worry about it in that case because I'm, say, pretty wealthy.

So, I could universalize that maxim. I could universalize certain other maxims so long as I build into them certain qualifications that make them, if not unique, at least you know, pretty rare circumstances where it would be appropriate to act accordingly. So, there are a number of problems with Kant's theory that reveal severe limitations and show, just as we saw with utilitarianism and social contract theory, that for all of the insights and benefits of this theory, it's not enough.

Something else is needed to supplement the theory. There are a few other things that are significant in supplementing the theory to arrive at an all-things-considered satisfactory moral theory. So that's Kant.

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