

# History of Philosophy

## 55 Kant's Ethics

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#### Abstract:

Dr. Arthur Holmes explores **Immanuel Kant's ethical framework**, positioning Kant as a **moral realist** who sought objective grounding for right and wrong during the mechanistic 18th century. Central to this system is the **categorical imperative**, an a priori principle that requires individuals to act only on maxims that could serve as **universal laws**. Holmes explains that Kant prioritizes a **good will** and the performance of duty over natural inclinations or desired outcomes, famously distinguishing between treating people as **ends in themselves** rather than mere means. This focus on **rational autonomy** separates moral actions from the deterministic laws of nature, establishing a realm of human freedom. Ultimately, Holmes details how Kant's ethics lead to the **postulation of God and immortality**, as these are necessary to ensure that virtue is eventually rewarded with happiness. Through this transition from pure to **practical reason**, Kant provides a rational basis for religious belief based on the internal demands of the moral conscience.

#### Briefing Document:

Analysis of Immanuel Kant's Ethical Framework and Postulates

Executive Summary

Immanuel Kant's ethical system, primarily detailed in his *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Metaphysical Foundations of Morals*, represents a definitive turn toward moral realism and objectivism in response to the mechanistic, non-teleological science of the 18th century. Kant posits that while metaphysical certainties regarding God cannot be demonstrated through pure reason, they can be rationally affirmed through the lens of ethics.

The core of Kantian ethics is the "Good Will"—the only thing unconditionally good—which manifests in acting out of a sense of duty rather than mere inclination. This duty is governed by the "Categorical Imperative," an a priori principle that demands universalizability, respect for persons as ends in themselves, and the autonomy of the will. Kant concludes that morality necessitates three rational postulates: the freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of a moral God who reconciles virtue with happiness.

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### Historical Context: The 18th-Century Moral Crisis

The aftermath of the Copernican and scientific revolutions created an "age of moral crisis." The shift toward a mechanistic worldview removed teleology—the conception of an all-inclusive ideal or "good" that nature strives to imitate.

- **Rejection of Determinism:** Philosophers like Thomas Hobbes were perceived as hedonists and determinists, prompting a search for objective grounding in morals.
  - **Precursors to Kant:**
    - **Cambridge Platonism:** Sought objective moral grounding.
    - **John Locke:** Attempted to ground natural law in rational human nature.
    - **Moral Sense Philosophers (Shaftesbury, Smith, Hume):** Proposed that moral sentiments are signs of objective moral qualities.
  - **Kant's Objective:** Kant sought to avoid the ethical implications of mechanistic science (causal determinism) which threatened individual moral responsibility.
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### The Nature of Kantian Moral Realism

Kant is a moral realist and objectivist. He maintains that there are objective moral truths and distinctives between right and wrong.

### Ethical Judgments as Synthetic A Priori

Kant's approach to ethics mirrors his metaphysics. Ethical judgments involve the confluence of two inputs:

1. **Empirical Input:** The factual description of an act (e.g., the act of stealing).
2. **A Priori Principle:** The concept of "wrongness" or moral law applied to the situation.

While Kant concluded that the categories used in science are purely subjective structures of the mind, he argued that the categories used in ethics have **objective correlates**. There is an objective moral law and an objective duty.

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Core Principles: Good Will and Duty

The Good Will

Kant asserts that the only thing "good without qualification" is a **Good Will**.

- **Internal Focus:** Morality is not found in the consequences of an act but in the intention, motive, and character of the individual.
- **Inclination vs. Duty:** Kant distinguishes between acting out of "inclination" (desire for empirical objects or happiness) and acting out of "duty" (respect for the a priori moral law).

Acting "Out of Duty"

Moral virtue is not achieved simply by doing the right thing (acting *in accordance* with duty), but by doing it *because* it is the right thing (acting *out of respect* for duty).

- **Example:** Observing the speed limit only because a police car is present has no moral virtue; observing it out of respect for the law does.

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The Categorical Imperative

Kant distinguishes between **Hypothetical Imperatives** ("If you want X, do Y") and the **Categorical Imperative**, which is an unconditional, non-iffy command of reason. He provides three formulations:

## 1. The Universalizability Principle

"Always act according to a maxim [moral rule] that you could will as a universal moral law."

- **Logical Consistency:** A maxim is invalid if it is self-defeating or self-contradictory when universalized.
- **The Promise Example:** If everyone made promises with no intention of keeping them, the institution of "promising" would cease to exist. Thus, a lying promise is logically impossible to will as a universal law.

## 2. Respect for Persons

"Treat persons as ends in themselves rather than as means only."

- **Human Value:** While humans use each other as means (e.g., student and teacher), they must always simultaneously treat the other as a rational being of intrinsic value.
- **Modern Application:** This principle forms the basis for contemporary medical and business ethics, as well as the "Principle of Generic Consistency" (respecting others' life projects as one respects their own).

## 3. Autonomy of the Will

The autonomous will is self-governing and free, whereas a "heteronomous" will is governed by external desires, social pressures, or inclinations.

- **Freedom via Reason:** A will is free only when it acts rationally out of a sense of duty. Acting purely on desire is functioning at a mechanistic, "animal" level.

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### Postulates of Practical Reason

Kant argues that while we cannot prove these concepts through theoretical reason, they are "morally necessary" postulates required for the moral life to make sense.

#### **Postulate                  Rational Necessity**

**Freedom of the Will**      If we have a duty to act, we must have the freedom to choose that act. Duty implies "ought," and "ought" implies "can."

<b>Immortality of the Soul</b>	Moral perfection (the achievement of the Good Will) is never completed in this life. A continuation of life is necessary for moral development to continue.
<b>Existence of God</b>	To reconcile the tension between virtue and happiness, one must postulate a moral being who guarantees that happiness is eventually proportionate to one's virtue.

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### Religion and the "Kingdom of Ends"

Kant's religious views are an extension of his ethics, described as "religion within the limits of reason alone."

- **The Kingdom of Ends:** A society where all members treat each other as ends. Kant saw this as the rational equivalent of the biblical "Kingdom of God."
- **Political Implications:** This concept led Kant to propose a "League of Nations" to pursue "Perpetual Peace," an idea later adopted by Woodrow Wilson.
- **The Figure of Christ:** In Kant's view, Christ serves as the supreme moral example of acting out of duty (e.g., "Not my will, but thine"). This contributed to the "Example Theory of the Atonement" in 19th-century liberal theology.

### Conceptions of Deity in Moral Consciousness

Kant correlates moral experiences with traditional religious attitudes:

- **Reason Legislating:** Correlates to God as the **Holy Lawgiver** (eliciting reverence/obedience).
  - **Inclination to Happiness:** Correlates to God as the **Good Provider** (eliciting grateful love).
  - **Conscience:** Correlates to God as the **Just Judge** (eliciting respect/fear of the law).
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### Key Quotes and Definitions

- **On the Good Will:** "There is only one thing that is unconditionally good... a good will."
- **On Absolute Morality:** Kant is often read as a moral absolutist who allows no exceptions, famously arguing that one must never tell a lie, even to a murderer looking for a victim.
- **On Human Nature:** Kant's focus on duty over desire has been criticized as "Prussian" or "less than fully human," though defenders argue he recognizes happiness as a God-given desire that simply cannot be the primary guide for moral action.
- **The Categorical Imperative Defined:** "Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

## Study Guide:

### Study Guide: Immanuel Kant's Ethical Framework

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of the ethical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, as presented in the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. It covers the transition from pure to practical reason, the nature of moral realism, the formulations of the categorical imperative, and the religious postulates derived from moral experience.

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#### Part 1: Short Answer Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer the following ten questions in two to three sentences, based on the provided text.

1. How does Kant transition from the "Critique of Pure Reason" to the "Critique of Practical Reason"?
2. In what sense is Kant considered a "moral realist"?

3. What was the "moral crisis" of the 18th century that influenced Kant's work?
4. How does Kant apply the concept of "synthetic a priori" judgments to ethics?
5. Why is the "good will" the only thing Kant considers unconditionally good?
6. Distinguish between a hypothetical imperative and a categorical imperative.
7. Explain the difference between acting "in accordance with duty" and acting "out of respect for duty."
8. What is the "universalizability principle" in Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative?
9. How does Kant's "principle of respect for persons" influence contemporary ethics?
10. What are the three "postulates of practical reason," and why are they necessary?

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#### Part 2: Answer Key

1. **How does Kant transition from the "Critique of Pure Reason" to the "Critique of Practical Reason"?** While the first critique establishes that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated through metaphysical or pure reason, the second critique suggests that God can be rationally affirmed through the lens of ethics. This shift moves from the faculty of knowing (pure reason) to the faculty of willing (practical reason) and the introduction of moral responsibility.
2. **In what sense is Kant considered a "moral realist"?** Kant is an objectivist who insists there are objective moral truths and real distinctions between right and wrong, virtue and vice. He believes that these moral qualities are not merely subjective feelings but are grounded in objective moral laws that can be discovered through reason.
3. **What was the "moral crisis" of the 18th century that influenced Kant's work?** The scientific revolution led to a mechanistic view of nature that lacked teleology (purpose) and the ideal of "the good." This created a need for a new way to ground ethics that was not based on deterministic science or

the perceived hedonism and atheism attributed to thinkers like Thomas Hobbes.

4. **How does Kant apply the concept of "synthetic a priori" judgments to ethics?** Kant views ethical judgments as a confluence of empirical input (a description of a factual act) and an a priori principle (the concept of right or wrong). In this framework, the a priori principle—specifically the categorical imperative—is applied to factual situations rather than being derived from them.
5. **Why is the "good will" the only thing Kant considers unconditionally good?** Kant argues that other qualities, such as natural inclinations or the desire for happiness, can be misdirected or self-indulgent. Only the inner moral disposition and the intention to act out of duty can be regarded as good without qualification, regardless of the consequences or empirical outcomes.
6. **Distinguish between a hypothetical imperative and a categorical imperative.** A hypothetical imperative is conditional, following the structure "if you want X, then do Y," and is oriented toward specific ends, desires, or inclinations. In contrast, a categorical imperative is unconditional and tells one what is right regardless of any personal goals or external factors.
7. **Explain the difference between acting "in accordance with duty" and acting "out of respect for duty."** Acting in accordance with duty means performing the correct action but perhaps for the wrong reason, such as obeying a speed limit only because a police car is present. Acting out of respect for duty means the motive for the action is the moral law itself, which Kant believes is the only way an act gains moral virtue.
8. **What is the "universalizability principle" in Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative?** This principle states that one should only act according to a maxim, or moral rule, that they could logically will to become a universal law. If universalizing a maxim leads to a self-contradiction—such as the destruction of the institution of promising—the action is deemed morally impermissible.
9. **How does Kant's "principle of respect for persons" influence contemporary ethics?** The principle states that people should always be

treated as ends in themselves and never merely as means to an end. This emphasis on the value of rational, self-determining beings has been heavily utilized in modern medical and business ethics, as well as in the development of human rights and international cooperation.

10. **What are the three "postulates of practical reason," and why are they necessary?** The postulates are the freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God. They are considered "practical necessities" because, without them, the moral experience of duty, the pursuit of moral perfection, and the eventual alignment of virtue with happiness would be nonsensical.

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### Part 3: Essay Questions

1. **The Conflict of Duties:** Analyze how Kant's categorical imperative handles situations where two moral duties appear to conflict. Discuss the role of "hierarchy of duties" and "qualified rules" in interpreting his stance on absolute moral prohibitions, such as lying.
2. **Autonomy vs. Heteronomy:** Examine Kant's distinction between the autonomous and heteronomous will. How does his insistence on self-government challenge the influence of social pressure and personal desire on moral decision-making?
3. **The Kingdom of Ends and Global Politics:** Explore the connection between Kant's "Kingdom of Ends" and his proposal for a "League of Nations." How does his ethical treatment of persons as ends in themselves provide a foundation for his political philosophy of "Perpetual Peace"?
4. **Kant's Theological Method:** Critically evaluate Kant's "Example Theory" of the atonement and his view of Jesus as a supreme moral example. To what extent does this approach represent a departure from traditional orthodox theology, and how did it influence 19th-century liberal theology?
5. **Critique of Kantian Rigor:** Some critics suggest Kant's focus on duty at the expense of desire makes his ethic "less than fully human." Defend or critique Kant's position by discussing his recognition of the natural desire for

happiness and his belief that duty and happiness cannot always coincide in this life.

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#### Part 4: Glossary of Key Terms

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>A Priori</b>	Knowledge or principles that are independent of empirical experience; in ethics, these are the mental structures we bring to moral thinking.
<b>Autonomy of the Will</b>	The state of being self-governed; acting out of one's own free will and respect for moral law rather than being driven by external influences or personal desires.
<b>Categorical Imperative</b>	An unconditional moral obligation that is binding in all circumstances and is not dependent on a person's inclination or purpose.
<b>Example Theory of Atonement</b>	The view that the significance of Christ's death lies in providing a supreme moral example of acting out of a sense of duty.
<b>Good Will</b>	The only thing that is unconditionally good; characterized by the intention or motive to act out of respect for moral duty.
<b>Heteronomy</b>	A will that is governed by something outside itself, such as inclinations, desires, or the expectations of others.
<b>Hypothetical Imperative</b>	A rule of conduct that is understood to apply only if one desires a particular goal (e.g., "if you want to be healthy, then exercise").
<b>Kingdom of Ends</b>	An ideal society where every individual is treated as an end in themselves and where all members are of equal worth and value.

<b>Moral Realism</b>	The philosophical position that there are objective moral truths and that moral distinctions (right/wrong) are based on reality rather than subjective opinion.
<b>Postulate</b>	A requirement of practical reason that cannot be proven by pure reason but is necessary to make sense of moral experience (e.g., God, freedom, immortality).
<b>Synthetic A Priori</b>	A type of judgment that is informative (synthetic) but known independently of experience (a priori); in ethics, applying a moral principle to a factual situation.
<b>Teleology</b>	The explanation of phenomena by the purpose they serve rather than by postulated causes; rejected by the mechanistic science of the 18th century.
<b>Universalizability</b>	The criterion that a moral rule must be capable of being applied to all people in all situations without creating a logical contradiction.