

The Social Relevance of Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperatives

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Abstract

This paper examines the relevance of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperatives to contemporary ethical issues. It begins with an overview of Kant's ethics, including the formulations of the categorical imperatives. The social relevance of the categorical imperatives is discussed in relation to ethical issues like suicide, abortion, violence, corruption, and terrorism. Applying the categorical imperatives reveals why these acts are morally wrong - they fail to show proper respect for humanity as an end in itself and cannot be reasonably universalised. The paper highlights the enduring usefulness of Kant's deontological approach as a lens for evaluating moral questions today. Though formulated centuries ago, the categorical imperatives provide a principled basis for ethical conduct by stressing moral rules binding on all rational beings.

Keywords: Categorical Imperative, Social Relevance, Good Will, suicide, Abortion, Corruption

1. Introduction

Throughout history, moral philosophers have grappled with the quandary of determining the fundamental basis of a valid moral system. The fundamental question is whether moral norms should derive from immutable, absolute foundations or arbitrary, situational concepts. Of more concern is the current surge in moral decay, leading to several contemporary moral dilemmas like suicide, abortion, violence, corruption, terrorism, and others. Due to this progress and increased moral subjectivity, morality is now considered personal. Therefore, it is illogical to establish a moral framework apart from one's personal or cultural environment. Can morality be universally applied? If so, what are the societal implications of a universalised moral theory in today's society? The German philosopher Immanuel Kant proposed a moral theory over two centuries ago grounded in a universal foundation. His views respond to this query. William Lawhead argues that Kant's moral philosophy remains a prominent source of ethical understanding in our current culture, particularly in relation to challenging ethical dilemmas in politics, law, medicine, and business (Lawhead, 2015, p. 370). Kantian moral theory prioritises the concepts of responsibility, reason, dignity, and value of human individuals, as well as an unchanging and absolute moral rule. His categorical imperatives encapsulate this moral paradigm. Ezedike emphasises that according to Kant's categorical imperatives, the moral correctness of an action is entirely independent of its effects. According to Ezedike (2020:185), determining the morality of an action can be done by assessing its alignment with a legitimate moral principle. He further asserts that the method to assess the validity of a moral rule is based on formalistic criteria. By "formalistic," he referred to the requirement for moral law to meet the criteria of categorical imperatives, which serve as the fundamental and highest principles or standards of morality. Kant formulates the "categorical imperative" as a universal ethical principle representing an absolute and unconditional obligation to be followed in all situations, justified as a goal (Johnson, 2018, p. 14). Thus, this paper demonstrates that Kant's formulation of categorical imperatives remains very socially relevant in contemporary times, owing to its wide-ranging applicability as an ethical framework.

Understanding Kant's Categorical Imperatives

Kant's moral theory asserts that goodwill is the only thing that can be considered truly good, without any exceptions. Kant recognises other entities that can be classified as morally good. For

example, he enumerated three classifications of these positive attributes, which are: (1) *mental abilities* (such as wit judgment); (2) *qualities of temperament* (such as courage, resolution and perseverance); and (3) *gifts of fortune* (such as power, riches, honour, health and happiness). However, while these things may be beneficial for him, they are not inherently good, as these positive attributes have the potential to be exploited for malevolent purposes. Therefore, he deduced that only "goodwill" possesses absolute goodness. According to Kant, goodwill should be grounded in rational principles and moral law rather than influenced by subjective factors like emotions and personal preferences. Additionally, actions prompted by goodwill should be performed out of a sense of obligation.

Kant argues that the core premise of our moral obligations is based on the "categorical imperative." An imperative is a directive or command. Kant distinguishes between two types of imperatives. The first sort is a hypothetical imperative (Lawhead, 2015, p. 372). The imperative being referred to is a conditional imperative. The structure is as follows: if you desire X, then perform Y. According to Kant, this principle informs us of our moral obligations, which depend on our desire to achieve a specific objective. The second type of imperative is the categorical imperative. Kant presents the moral law as a categorical imperative. The categorical imperative prescribes our moral obligations without relying on preconditions, subjective desires, or qualifications (Lawhead, 2015, p. 372). It is categorical due to its specific format: DO X! This indicates the moral obligations that are universally applicable and binding in all circumstances and at all times. Moreover, this directive applies to all situations and remains constant. It is universally applicable, including all individuals, at all times and in all situations. It is coherent and does not result in any inconsistency (Lawhead, 2015, p. 372).

Formulation of the Categorical Imperatives

Kant argues that there is only one fundamental principle of morality, known as the categorical imperative. However, this principle can be expressed in at least three different ways. Each formulation is synonymous with the others, although each one highlights a distinct facet of the rationality of morality.

Kant articulates the initial formulation of the categorical imperative as follows:

"act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (FMM, 39).

The initial statement urges us to adhere to universal law, which implies that we should behave based on a principle that applies to all rational creatures rather than one that is only legitimate if we desire a specific outcome. Therefore, it recommends determining if the guiding principle of a potential action can or cannot be universally applied and then deciding whether to accept or reject it. Kant emphatically cautioned against the notion that our immoral principles become universally applicable. He continues to uphold the principle of moral evaluation that requires us to be capable of desiring that a principle of action should be universally applicable. The second iteration of the categorical imperative formulated by him is as follows: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only" (FMM, 47)

This revised version implies that everyone possesses inherent value and dignity, and we must refrain from objectifying or dehumanising others. We cannot assist in the exploitation of other individuals as mere instruments. Due to this particular attribute, we must regard ourselves and others not solely as a means but also as ends. According to Kant, an end can be described as an object formed via the activity of free will, which is determined by the notion of the thing (Paton, 1963, p. 166). For Kant, only rational individuals, such as agents or persons, may be seen as ends in themselves. Since only they possess an unconditioned and absolute worth, it is incorrect to merely employ them as instruments to achieve a goal whose value is merely relative. William Lawhead

emphasised that individuals are noumenal entities that go beyond their empirical manifestations and are not objects. According to him (2015: 374), individuals cannot possess conditional worth but have absolute or intrinsic value, as they are the origin of all conditional value. A notable aspect of this statement is that Kant openly asserts that we should consider ourselves with reverence and not solely as a tool for a purpose.

Kant's third formulation of the categorical imperative centres on the idea of the will of every rational being as making universal law. Therefore, this formula is based on the principle that a rational will makes or gives itself the laws it obeys, hence the principle of autonomy. It is expressed as follows:

"So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxim" (GMM, 33).

According to Kant, the autonomy of the will is the highest fundamental of morality. It is the one principle that governs all moral rules and the associated obligations. Conversely, Kant argues that the heteronomy of the will is the origin of all false moral principles. It fails to provide the foundation for moral duty but also contradicts the concept of duty and the moral nature of the will. Furthermore, freedom is crucial to the autonomy of the will. According to Kant, moral rule is not an external imposition but a manifestation of one's rational nature. Lawhead posited that if every individual adhered to the principles of rationality, they would form an ideal society (referred to by Kant as a "kingdom of ends") in which everyone would possess autonomy while adhering to a shared universal moral code (Lawhead, 2015, p. 374).

The Social Relevance of the categorical imperatives

The essence of Kantian categorical imperative might be summarised as follows: "Only act on principles that you can simultaneously become universal laws." (Copleston, 2003, p. 328) The ultimate moral rule must possess universality, meaning that every specific moral law must be objective and devoid of personal bias. The determination cannot be solely based on my wants, but rather, it must be neutral and fair to all individuals involved. If I behave in a morally upright manner, it is expected that the other individual has an obligation to also behave in a morally upright manner. Presently, our society is deeply plagued by many forms of corruption and immorality. Morality appears to have been discarded and disregarded in the annals of history. It is a matter of inquiry if many individuals in our society possess a conscience. Can it be asserted that individuals who engage in these immoral behaviours nonetheless possess a sense of moral awareness? Every individual has the duty and accountability to ensure that their behaviour aligns with the ultimate goal of humanity. By adhering to the concept of benevolence and treating humanity as an end-in-itself, we can achieve the utmost moral perfection. Kant argues that the only object that possesses absolute goodness is goodwill. Regardless of the outcome or repercussions, it is essential for one's activities to always be morally upright and driven by good intentions. In this analysis, we will examine the societal relevance of Kant's Categorical Imperatives in relation to contemporary social and ethical matters such as suicide, abortion, violence, terrorism, and corruption.

Kant's Categorical Imperatives and the Ethical Dilemma of Suicide

Suicide is the deliberate act of ending one's own life, done with full autonomy and intention. There are two forms of suicide: direct and indirect. Examples of direct suicide include methods such as hanging, shooting oneself, and ingesting poison. In this scenario, death is intentionally desired either as an outcome, such as in euthanasia or as a method to achieve a goal, such as in a hunger strike leading to death. Indirect suicide refers to the act of intentionally causing an event that is not directly intended to cause death, but it is known that death will result from it (Pazhayampallil, 1997, p. 1035). In this scenario, death is not desired but instead allowed. One seeks to pursue something

lawful and perceived to have a greater significance than bodily existence. For instance, a pilot during a conflict may intentionally crash his plane, which is carrying bombs, into an enemy vessel. Similarly, if a lifeboat becomes overcrowded in a shipwreck, passengers may leap into the sea, even when there is no chance of being rescued (Grisez & Boyle, 1979, p. 108).

Suicide is commonly perceived as an act that brings shame and is morally condemnable. In moral philosophy, figures such as Socrates, Aristotle, Kant, Camus, and others have rejected the concept. At the same time, the Stoics, Hume, and contemporary humanists advocate it as a fundamental aspect of self-determination and human freedom. According to Camus, a person who commits suicide is a coward who admits that life is overwhelming and cannot comprehend its value, hence perceiving life as not worth the effort (Camus, 1966, p. 5).

Kant deems suicide as undesirable due to its implication of the eradication of both the subject of morality (man) and morality itself. Lawhead argues that by choosing to end one's life to escape suffering and disillusionment, one perceives oneself as an object controlled by other factors (Lawhead, 2015, p. 374). Therefore, by employing the categorical imperative as a standard for morally assessing suicide and utilising the issue of suicide to examine this standard, we can consider the following scenario: "A man, due to a succession of misfortunes that have accumulated to the extent of despair, becomes disillusioned with life. However, he still possesses complete rationality to introspect and determine whether his intended course of action contradicts his obligation to himself." He should, after that, administer the test to determine if the principle of his behaviour can be generalised as a law applicable to all of nature. Stated in this manner: I have made it my guiding philosophy to end my life if its continuation poses more harm than it offers enjoyment due to my self-centeredness. The remaining inquiry is whether this principle of self-love can be universally established as a fundamental law of nature. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that a natural system in which the same sensation, designed to promote the continuation of life, actually destroys life would inherently contradict itself and hence cannot exist as a functioning natural system. Therefore, the maxim cannot be universally applicable and is thus utterly contradictory to the fundamental concept of all moral obligations (FMM, 85).

Based on Kant's categorical imperative, the problem of suicide fails to meet the necessary criteria. Kant argues that suicide is morally incorrect as it fails to uphold the inherent value and respect for human beings. Furthermore, engaging in suicide entails the annihilation of humanity and regards it just as a tool to attain a desired outcome, such as liberation from burdens. Therefore, individuals must confront the difficulties and obstacles of existence with optimism rather than evading their obligations by resorting to suicide. Universalising this conduct would result in the eradication of both society and the human race. A parent may contemplate suicide due to his inability to provide sustenance, shelter, clothing, and education for his children. By engaging in this activity, the children are subjected to severe difficulties, which may lead them to take their own lives in order to escape their troubles.

Consequently, this would result in the eradication of the family and, ultimately, the extinction of the human species. Therefore, suicide is in direct opposition to the obligation of individuals to behave based on their duty or in alignment with the moral code rather than for personal gain. Suicide is an act of cowardice and self-centeredness.

The Categorical Imperative and the Ethical Dilemma of Abortion

Abortion, as described by Peschke, refers to the deliberate removal of a non-viable human fetus from the mother's womb through human intervention. This can involve either killing the fetus before removal or exposing it to inevitable death outside the womb (Peschke, 1966, p. 314). In his encyclical letter "Evangelium Vitae," Pope John Paul II defines abortion as the intentional and immediate termination, through any method, of a human being in the early stage of their existence,

from conception until birth (Pope John Paul 1995:11). Abortion can occur through direct or indirect means and can be either spontaneous or induced through artificial methods. Spontaneous abortion, often known as miscarriage, is caused by either a developmental anomaly in the fetus or an illness affecting the woman. Induced abortion, often known as direct abortion, refers to the deliberate expulsion of human life from the uterus, either by the patient herself or with the help of someone else.

Regarding direct abortion, it involves intentionally expelling or destroying the fetus as the desired outcome or as a means to reach this outcome. On the other hand, indirect abortion refers to allowing the death of the baby as an unintended consequence of deliberately intending a different outcome (Peschke, 1966, p. 315). An example of indirect abortion is the demise of a fetus that is not yet capable of surviving, which occurs as a result of the surgical extraction of a diseased uterus from the expectant woman.

Although several reasons have been put out in support of abortion, it is deemed morally incorrect to intentionally and deliberately carry out an abortion when examined through the perspective of Kant's categorical imperative. This is because we cannot generalise the act of ending a child's life based on social, eugenic, or economic considerations, as these factors do not pose any direct threat to our survival. The endorsement of intentionally desired and arranged abortion for any reason, whatever, will result in the infringement of the categorical imperative, which also asserts: "Behave in a manner that you always treat humanity, whether in your self or the self of others, as an end in itself and never merely as a means." Induced abortion regards a human person (a child) as a mere instrument to achieve a specific objective. Consequently, it is deemed incorrect. Another justification for its incorrectness, when considering Kant's categorical imperative, is that universalising the act of abortion will result in the devaluation of human life, transforming society into a ruthless environment where only the most adaptable individuals thrive. The mother possesses the ability to expel the child because of her physical strength or advantageous position rather than being justified in doing so. Similarly, anyone who has the opportunity and motive to take another person's life will do so promptly and without feeling guilty.

Furthermore, one of the repercussions is the occurrence of a domino effect. This means that if we permit the act of ending human life in one circumstance, we will eventually permit it in all circumstances, ultimately resulting in the eradication of human society. However, abortion goes against the ethical duty of individuals to consistently regard human beings, including themselves and others, not as a mere instrument but as a valuable end in themselves. Abortion is ethically wrong and does not guarantee the preservation of human life in all circumstances.

Categorical Imperatives and the Issue of Violence, Corruption and Terrorism

A prevalent societal issue that has profoundly affected our contemporary society is the proliferation of violence, corruption, and terrorism. The pervasive prevalence of violence, corruption, and terrorism in the contemporary world raises a profound ethical dilemma regarding their partial or complete justification. Violence, as defined by the World Health Organization, refers to the deliberate use of physical force or power, whether threatened or actual, against oneself, another individual, or a group or community. This use of force has the potential to cause injury, death, psychological damage, hindered development, or deprivation (WHO, 2002). Violence includes acts of physical, sexual, and psychological aggression, as well as the use of threats, deprivation, and neglect towards oneself or others. Corruption can be understood as a departure from the proper order, driven by selfish motives to acquire unfair advantages. Corruption is a societal problem that can manifest either at an institutional level or on an individual level. It pursues excessive satisfaction by disregarding established rules and standards of operation. Terrorism entails the aggressive infringement upon an individual, both physically and psychologically, as well as the violation of

their property and freedom in a perilous manner that even jeopardises their survival. Hoffman defines terrorism as the intentional use of violence or the threat of violence against civilians to instil fear (Hoffman, 2006, p. 15). These three entities have achieved extensive global prevalence in contemporary times. The peril presented by these societal issues to the tranquillity, advancement, and fundamental survival of human society has prompted several individuals to condemn them entirely, rejecting all basis for their justification.

Nevertheless, specific individuals perceive these actions as reasonable methods to secure their existence in a society that appears to endorse the principles of "might is right" or "survival of the fittest". Regarding corruption, it is contended that it serves as a means of ensuring one's survival and meeting basic needs. An underpaid labourer rationalises corruption as a form of "hidden remuneration". However, violence and terrorism are perceived as methods of resolving conflicts or asserting some perceived justifiable grievances.

However, when we examine these social issues through the lens of Kant's categorical imperative, it becomes evident that these actions are inherently immoral and cannot be applied universally as a guiding principle due to their association with corruption, violence, or terrorism. The maxim "when in desperate need of money for family support, resort to fraudulent means" cannot be universally applied, nor can the maxim "use violence to seek justice for harm inflicted by others." Legalising these actions would lead to a disorderly and perilous society where fundamental human rights would be severely compromised. A civilisation constructed around these detrimental aspects cannot achieve stability and would lack advancement and growth.

Evaluation and conclusion

From the preceding, Kant's categorical imperatives have some relevance to current ethical dilemmas in the following manner. Firstly, it establishes a robust philosophical basis for moral absolutism, emphasising logical obligation and universal moral principles. Kant's approach dismisses moral relativism and situational ethics in favour of immutable moral truths. Although some may criticise this as excessively inflexible, it does offer a principled counterweight to more subjective approaches to ethics. Furthermore, the utilisation of categorical imperatives in relation to topics such as suicide, abortion, murder, and corruption demonstrates their extensive suitability as an ethical framework. The imperatives are not dependent on particular circumstances but instead assess the intrinsic morality of actions. This facilitates a uniform moral evaluation across many ethical quandaries.

Nevertheless, there exist arguments that might be levied against Kant's theory. Some contend that the complete restriction on treating humans solely as a means neglects to consider intricate scenarios where harm can be reduced. Kant's imperatives lack flexibility and fail to offer guidance when two moral principles clash in an intricate scenario. In summary, Kant's categorical imperatives significantly impact moral philosophy by constructing an ethical framework based on rationality, obligation, and reverence for human beings. Despite its imperfections, the theory remains a viable framework for assessing moral decisions using universally accepted principles of morality. This exemplifies Kant's deontological methodology's lasting influence and societal significance in changing cultural standards. Ultimately, the categorical imperatives are a defining characteristic of moral absolutism and one of philosophy's most impactful ethical frameworks. Their focus on ethical obligation and universal principles remains relevant in examining moral quandaries in the present day.

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