

Textauszug zur Vorbereitung auf den Workshop  
„Achtsamkeit und ethische Urteilsbildung“

### Ethische Prinzipien – Beispiel 2:

**Kant's categorical imperative: "Act on that maxim which you will to become a universal law."**

Immanuel Kant, born in 1724 in Königsberg, Germany, influenced eighteenth-century philosophy more than any other Western thinker. His writings established a permanent contribution to epistemology and ethics. Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (1785) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) are important books for every serious student of ethics.

Kant gave intellectual substance to the golden rule by his categorical imperative, which implies that what is right for one is right for all. As a guide for measuring the morality of our action, Kant declared: "Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." In other words, check the underlying principle of your decision, and see whether you want it applied universally. The test of a genuine moral obligation is that it can be universalized. The decision to perform an act must be based on a moral law no less binding than such laws of nature as gravity. Categorical here means unconditional, without any question of extenuating circumstances, without any exceptions. Right is right and must be done even under the most extreme conditions. What is morally right we ought to do even if the sky should fall, that is, despite whatever consequences may follow.

Kant believed there were higher truths (which he called *noumena*) superior to our limited reason and transcending the physical universe. Conscience is inborn in every person, and it must be obeyed. The categorical imperatives, inherent in human beings, are apprehended not by reason but through conscience. By the conscience one comes under moral obligation; it informs us when we ought to choose right and shun evil. To violate one's conscience—no matter how feeble and uninformed—brings about feelings of guilt. Through the conscience, moral law is embedded in the texture of human nature.

The moral law is unconditionally binding on all rational beings. Someone breaks a promise, for example, because it seems to be in his or her own interest; but if all people broke their promises when it suited them, promises would cease to have meaning, and societies would deteriorate into terror. Certain actions, therefore, are always wrong: cheating, stealing, and dishonesty, for example.

Benevolence and truth-telling are always and universally right. These moral duties are neither abrogated by the passage of time nor superseded by such achievements as the Bill of Rights. Even if one could save another's life by telling a lie, it would still be wrong. Deception by the press to get a good story or by advertisers to sell products cannot be excused or overlooked in the Kantian view. Dishonesty in public relations is unacceptable. Violent pornography in entertainment is not just one variable among many; it is too fundamental an issue to be explained away by an appeal to the First Amendment.

Kant's contribution is called *deontological ethics* (*deon* from the Greek word for duty). The good will "shines like a jewel," he wrote, and the obligation of the good conscience is to do its duty for the sake of duty. Ethics for Kant was largely reducible to reverence for duty, visible in his work as a hymn on its behalf. With exercising the good will an end in itself, the will-duty relationship can be elaborated this way. We have a duty

*to interact with others in ways that maximize their ability to exercise free will, or reason. To fail to do so is to fail to recognize our existence as rational beings who, by the presence of our will to reason, are obligated to act morally toward others.*

For Kant, categorical imperatives must be obeyed even to the sacrifice of all natural inclinations and socially accepted standards. Kant's ethics have an austere quality, but they are generally regarded as

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having greater motivating power than subjective approaches that are easily rationalized on the basis of temporary moods. His categorical imperative encourages obedience and faithful practice.

Sir David Ross, a twentieth-century Oxford philosopher, developed a different version of duty ethics in his books *The Right and the Good* (1930) and *The Foundation of Ethics* (1939). Moral duties such as keeping your promises were compelling to him as they were for Kant. But rather than constructing such principles rationally, he argued that "objective moral truths are intuitively known, self-evident facts about the world." Obligations not to lie and duties of justice, gratitude, and noninjury have inherent value, and Ross called them "prima-facie duties" - prima facie meaning upon first view or self-evident. Since it is immediately obvious to human beings that they should not kill, Kant's universalizability construction was unnecessary, and accepting a universe of formal laws was not required. Telling the truth is a self-evident obligation to media professionals, and attempting to justify it further in Ross's view only divides and deters potential adherents. While *Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning* emphasizes the classic deontological ethics of Kant, Ross's prima-facie duties will be helpful at various points as an alternative.