

For Kant, we should in all other actions with rational beings (i.e., other people) treat people as an end and not as a means to an end. This means that when faced with a moral dilemma, we must formulate a rule that is logically consistent at all times, and then we must be willing to act on that logic. For example, lying is never permissible according to Kant. He would not permit lying even for altruistic motives.

There are a couple of problems with Kant's categorical imperative. First, it allows for no exceptions. However, for almost every rule there are exceptions. Of course, the exceptions should be rare, but nonetheless they exist. Let us take a look at an example; the case is called the hypothetical of the inquiring murderer. Suppose that an abused wife whose husband has threatened to kill her if she leaves confides in you that she is leaving her husband, and she is going to hide out at the local shelter for abused women. Now, further suppose the husband asks you where his wife is, and states that he believes that she may be at the local shelter. You reasonably know that if you don't tell the husband a lie he will likely find the wife and kill her. Kant would say that you have to tell the truth. However, this seems too harsh for most people. The reason that Kant would say that you have to tell the truth is because lying can't be a universal law. However, it seems to us that the reason that this cannot be a universal law is because if people lied all the time, no one would trust anyone else and ultimately it would be hard to form any type of society. But isn't this really another way of saying that ultimately consequences really do matter?

Another problem with Kant's formulation is that rules often conflict. We are left with little guidance as to what we should do when the rules contradict each other. Let us return to the case of the inquiring murderer above. It is perfectly logically consistent to have a rule that says that you shouldn't participate in the killing of an innocent person. However, in the case above you are left with two choices. You tell the husband the truth and he kills his wife, making you a participant in her death, or you lie to him saving the wife, but committing the moral wrong of lying.

Despite its problems, Kant's categorical imperative is useful for a couple of reasons. First, Kant forces us to be rational. Kant's insistence on logic forces us to consider our actions in the cold light of reason. If you accept that morality must be based on rationality, then it must be rational at all the times. You cannot accept rationality in one instance and not another. A second advantage of Kant's philosophy is that it forces the individual to admit that he or she is subject to the same moral imperatives as everyone else. No one can claim to be "special," and therefore, exempt from morality.

VIRTUE ETHICS

Virtue ethics can be traced back to Aristotle and his two major ethical works *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics*. The idea behind virtue ethics is that we should determine what characteristics are desirable and then try to promote those characteristics in people.

In order to determine what types of characteristics we should promote, it is necessary to determine what type of being we are. In other words, Aristotle asks what the "end" of a human being is. What is it we are made to do? In many translations of Aristotle, he says that the purpose of a human being is "happiness." We, however, agree with Professor Daniel Robinson that happiness (as in "drink-up let's have another round") is a limited concept, and therefore, a more appropriate concept would be that the end of a human being is a flourishing life.

In order to achieve the flourishing life, Aristotle thought one should habitually engage in practicing the virtues. Aristotle said that the virtues were derived from the mean between two extremes. For example, cowardice is an extreme defect of character. The opposite of cowardice is heedlessness. The mean between these two extremes is courage. The coward is one who always runs away from any confrontation. The heedless person is willing to fight at the slightest provocation, but the courageous person knows when to "fight the good fight." Some of the other virtues would include: generosity, patience, tactfulness, tolerance, loyalty, civility, and compassion to name just a few.

The critics of Aristotle's virtue ethics question how we can know what the end of a human being is. Who is to say that happiness or a flourishing life is the purpose of a human being? Religious absolutists of many varieties would say that the worship and acceptance of the laws of a given deity are the reason we exist.

A second criticism of virtue ethics is what makes these virtues the right ones. One might argue that moderation in the face of vice is no virtue at all. For example, many people believe that indulgence in any kind of alcohol or drug is wrong, and therefore, no amount of moderation is acceptable.

A final criticism is that it is not clear that even if we agree on some purpose of a human life, and then agree on what constitutes virtues, that these can be taught. For example, there are many examples throughout history of governments and the people who work for them engaging in cruelty of the most vicious sort. Nazi Germany is but one example; however, such examples are not, unfortunately, relegated to any one period or even the past. Do we really think that we could have reformed a Hitler, Stalin, or Saddam Hussein?

In spite of the criticism, virtue ethics is something we should seriously consider because it does offer a holistic approach. Also, we can think of at least one notable example in which it does seem to have worked. One of America's founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin, noticed at an early age that he had certain leadership qualities. He also noticed that he engaged in some behaviors that people didn't like. As a young man, he was fond of making up puns, and he noticed that people thought of him as a jokester. Franklin set about reforming himself and came up with a list of virtues that he tried to practice every day. From all outward appearances, Franklin's personal psychological experiment seems to have worked. Franklin rose from modest beginnings to become a successful man, politician, diplomat, writer, and inventor.