

Ethical Theory

Imperatives & Universal Law

As you read the material for our next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the reading:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.

Reading

- Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, editor's introduction, paragraphs 21–36 & second section, paragraphs 1–41 (pp. xvii–xxiii & 21–37).

The book does not number the paragraphs, so you will need to number them yourself in the page margins. The editor's introduction has 59 paragraphs and the second section has 89.

Questions

1. Kant begins the second section (in paragraphs 1–10) rejecting an approach to ethics based upon examples, even including approaches involving an understanding of God, and empirical inquiry. What reasons does Kant give for rejecting such an approach? Why does the proper approach to ethics require undertaking a metaphysics of morals?
2. After this, Kant has a long discussion (in second section, paragraphs 11–25) about the different types of principles that command rational beings like us. According to Kant, what does it mean for rational beings to have a will? What is a “holy will” and how is it different from our will? Why does this lead to a discussion of imperatives? What are the differences between hypothetical and categorical imperatives?
3. During this discussion, Kant raises (in the second section, paragraph 21) the idea that everyone seems to seek the same end: happiness. However, he later comes back (in the second section, paragraph 25) to say that, nevertheless, happiness is still unable to provide a foundation for morality. What is his argument defending this claim?
4. Finally, Kant believes he is now ready (in the second section, paragraphs 26–33) to present his first formulation of the categorical imperative, which is typically called the formula of universal law. What is this formulation, and why does Kant believe it is justified to act as a moral command for all human action? How does Kant apply this formula to show that the following all violate the moral law:
 - A. Suicide (paragraph 35),
 - B. A false promise (paragraph 36),
 - C. Neglecting one's own talents (paragraph 37), and
 - D. Failing to be beneficent to other people (paragraph 38).