

Test case 1

Let us consider these two categorical imperatives, that in my view are not considering any consequence or hypothetical scenarios:

1. We must safeguard and protect all human life, since being human is an end in itself and therefore has the basic right to live.
2. We must always tell the truth, because it is immoral to lie, no matter the case

Now consider I'm in Nazi Germany and an officer comes to my house and asks if I know of any Jews hiding in the neighborhood, knowing that if found, the Jewish would be put to death. Having to oblige by both these imperatives, what would I do, considering I know the location of one (who I don't have any personal attachment with)? If I tell the truth and give the Jewish's location to the officer, I am going against the first imperative, but if I lie, in order to keep the person alive, I am going against the second imperative. How do you solve this question? How would Kant have approached this issue?

And to reiterate and clarify, I am considering a hypothetical scenario, yes, but this could, and was, a very real example for many people. I also don't consider I'm making an hypothetical approach when it comes to the creation of the imperatives, but only of a scenario where I would have to use it. But, obviously, I could be completely wrong.

Davide Vecchi: My answer is that Kant would still argue that we should never lie. In the 1785 book Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (but I don't remember where), Kant considers an analogous example (facilitating a possible murder by being honest) and he justifies his views on various grounds. The basic point he makes is that the consequentialist way of thinking is always flawed. Secondly, he argues that we can never know with certainty that good consequences will ensue by lying. Thirdly, even lying for altruistic motives (e.g., saving someone's life) might have negative unpredictable consequences. (Note these two points result from consequentialist analysis). Thus, the best is always to avoid the known evil (i.e., dishonesty) because, even in case our honesty will generate negative consequences, it will not be our fault as we have done our duty. Like many of you, I find this way of thinking obtuse, somehow incoherent and, in practical terms, completely unrealistic. This is what Mill argues in his 1863 Utilitarianism.

In the end, I would say your statement 2 (based on the first version of the categorical imperative) is fundamental for Kant. Statement 1 is only partially correct because, while the promotion of human welfare is good in itself and we should treat other humans as ends, the end of moral action is not safeguarding and protecting human life at all costs. If the latter were the case, it would be inconsistent with considering capital punishment as moral. The elephant in the room here is the relationship between the first and second versions of the categorical imperative, which, to me, do not convey the same idea.

Test case 2

According to Kant, killing should be retaliated with capital punishment. But implementing capital punishment requires another person to kill the murderer. Therefore, by the same application of the principle, the executor of the murderer should be executed. This leads to an infinite regress and, eventually, the end of our species. Is this an incoherence in Kant's ethics?

Davide Vecchi: My answer is that Kant would (should) argue that the executor must be dispensed from moral responsibility; what the executor does is just to follow an order instead of trying to apply the categorical imperative; given this, the executor should not be retributed with the same kind of treatment applied to murderers who choose to kill.