

Problems with Kantian Deontology

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will look at various different problems facing Kantian deontology and some responses to them. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Moral Luck

To begin with, recall that Kantian deontology is a form of deontology that places absolute moral value in the agent's intent. One problem with this emphasis on intention is that it rules out the moral relevance of external circumstances. In particular, it doesn't seem to make sense of the fact that we judge people even when they aren't fully responsible for the outcome of their actions.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Suppose that two people intend to murder different people. They both decide to use poison. The first successfully kills their victim. But the second doesn't, because their intended victim just happened to be immune to that type of poison.

People may think that the successful murderer is worse than the unsuccessful one, even though the difference between them was due to luck. For this reason, this is often called moral luck. Kant thinks morality can't depend on such things as luck because he argues that moral worth is only in the intentions.

There are many other instances where moral luck plays a part.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine you decide to dedicate your life to science. You figure that you need to cut off all contact with your family and friends in order to put all your energies into making discoveries.

If you manage to advance science through your efforts, then it may have been worth it. But perhaps you're just not cut out for it, and you never make a lasting contribution to knowledge.

Most people would think highly of you if you were successful. But if you were unlucky enough to fail at your life's work, then you might be judged badly as someone who abandoned their family for no good reason. As you can see, moral luck plays a part here.

In the above example, whether or not you have natural talents (e.g. for scientific study) is out of your control. There are many other factors that could be out of your control.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you're lucky enough to be born into a wealthy family, then it's easier to make moral choices. For instance, you're in a position to give to charity and you don't need to fight people for the necessities of life.

The circumstances around your birth play a role in the opportunities you have to act morally.

2. Other Problems

Sometimes it seems like you should do something even though it goes against certain (Kantian) duties. For instance, it might be the case that saving human life requires lying or stealing.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Perhaps a homeless person needs to steal medicine from a drug store to treat a chronic illness. Or maybe you lie to a police officer about the whereabouts of someone because you fear they will be mistreated and die in custody.

A Kantian deontologist seems to be unable to resolve the conflict between the duty to save life and the duty to not steal or lie.

Another problem for the Kantian deontologist is that they seem to be committed to the idea that ignorance is good. That's because you can do bad things and still be a good person as long as you are unaware of the moral impact of your actions.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Let's say you've bought a ring where the diamond comes from a country that sells them to fund a warlord's criminal activities. If you don't know about it, then you can't have intended to contribute to this situation.

Since intentions are the only thing that matters for the Kantian deontologist, it's better to not know about such global political issues. That's because you can still have a good will if you unintentionally contribute to international abuses. There are many other examples like this.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine that you manufacture snacks. You produce food that has a very high proportion of salt, sugar, and fat. You do this because it's cheaper and easier to make low quality food taste good.

If you didn't know that excess salt, sugar, and fat contribute to serious illness, then you wouldn't be to blame for the harm this causes.

But this doesn't mean you can be *intentionally* ignorant. If you tried to cover your back by purposely avoiding looking into the moral impact of your actions, the Kantian could fault you for this. For instance, if a lazy doctor intentionally failed to check up on her patients, she would be to blame for any harm that comes to them, even though she's unaware of their condition.

Finally, Kantian deontology is often charged with neglecting the role of feelings in ethics. This criticism points out that, since duties are determined by pure reason alone, the Kantian can't make sense of the fact that our emotional response to situations seems to be important for ethical action.



DID YOU KNOW

An early version of this criticism was made by the great German poet and philosopher, Friedrich Schiller.

He mocked what he believed was the strange result of Kant's ethics: that you shouldn't like the people you help so that you're sure you're doing good from duty rather than feelings.

It should be noted that Kant has an answer to this objection. He says that it's fine for our feelings to be involved, as long as it's reason that dictates what's the right thing to do.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by looking at how Kantian deontology fails to account for **moral luck** in our ethical evaluations. We saw that factors outside people's control often play a role in the way we judge people. Since Kantian deontology says moral worth is only in the intention, it can't account for this.

Then various **other problems** were considered, including the problem of conflicting duties, the apparent commitment to ignorance, and the dismissal of the role of feelings in ethics.