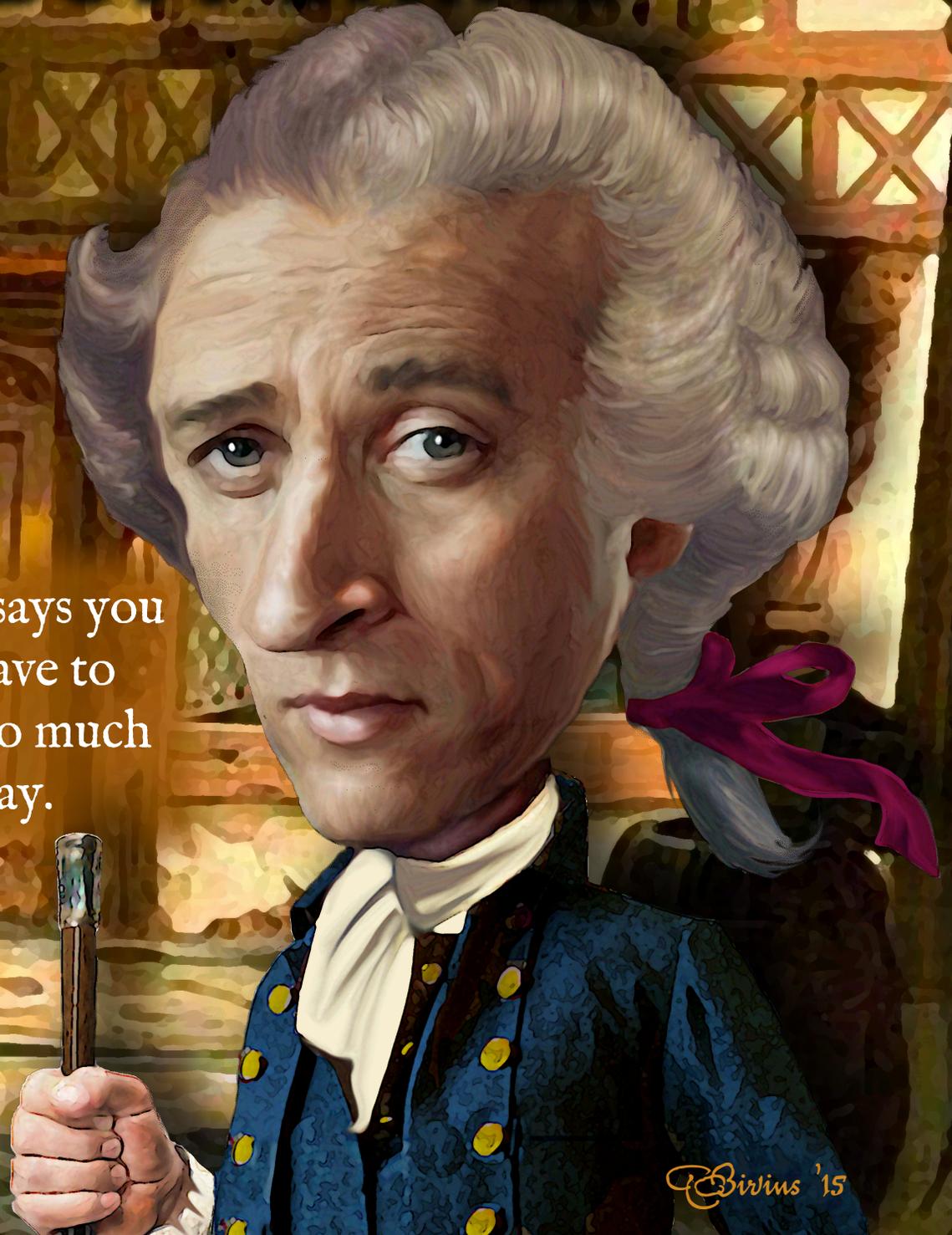


# THE STORY OF **ETHICS**

*How the media got moral, or not*

## **DUTY ETHICS**

In which Kant says you  
kan. You just have to  
quit worrying so much  
and do what I say.



*Bivins '15*

# Immanuel Kant and the Ethics of Duty

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was born and lived his entire life in Königsberg, the capital of what was then called Prussia. By all accounts, he was a quiet intellectual whose studious life ran like clockwork, day after day, and year after year.



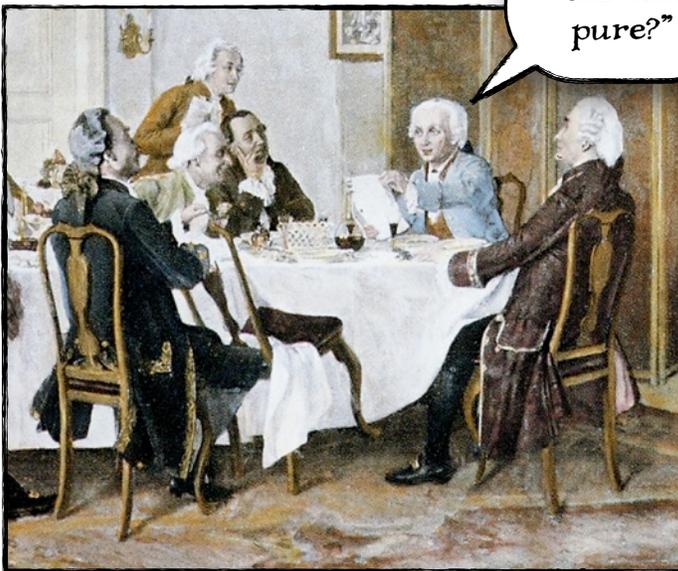
Don't bother me. I have to walk so everyone will know what time it is.

For example, the walk he took at three-thirty every afternoon was so punctual that local housewives would set their clocks by him. He never married and he owned only one piece of art in his household, advocating the absence of passion in favor of logic. However, despite his reputation of being a solitary man, he was considered a very sociable person: he would regularly have guests over for dinner, insisting that sociable company was good for his constitution, as was laughter.



Then I said, "You call that pure?"

Kant telling a funny joke at dinner.



Kant was a well respected university professor for most of his life, but he was in his late fifties before he did anything that would bring him the reputation he has today.

In a period of just under ten years at the end of the 18th century, Immanuel Kant produced some of the most influential philosophical work of his or any other time. Through various volumes covering a huge array of topics, he developed a systematic view of the universe such as had not been seen since the time of the Greeks. Along with his other achievements, Kant also created an ethical system based solely on the human ability to reason and the belief that all moral actions were the result of **virtuous intent**.

More than any other philosopher, Kant emphasized the way in which the moral life was centered on **DUTY**.

Immanuel Kant believed that nothing was good in itself except **GOOD WILL**...  
...and maybe cheap postage



Kant seems to have appeared on a lot of German postage stamps through the years.

Kant defined **WILL** as: the uniquely human capacity to act according to principles.

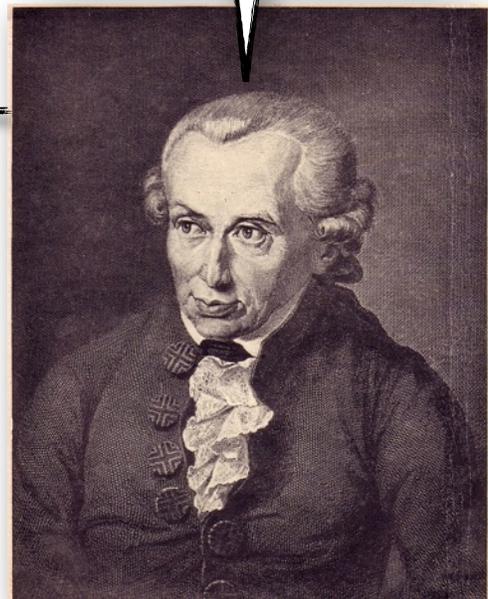
He believed that actions have true moral worth only when they spring from a recognition of a duty and a choice to discharge it (acting on your principles).

It's not about following orders. That's an **EXTERNAL DUTY**, imposed by others. It's about imposing it on yourself because you know it's right.

This self-imposed duty is much more morally advanced than an externally imposed duty.

You must march with us and shoot the enemy. It's your duty to the King!

But, I don't want to shoot anybody. It's my duty not to kill.



So, how do we figure out exactly what a duty is? No problem. Kant figured it out for us.

**FIRST OF ALL, KANT RECOGNIZED TWO TYPES OF DUTIES:**

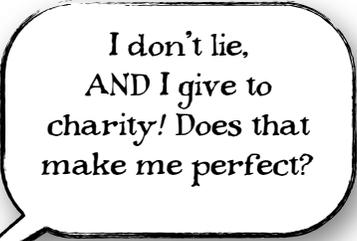
- Perfect Duty—one that we must always observe, all the time, no exceptions.
  - He stated these as proscriptions (things we must always refrain from doing).
    - "Don't lie."
- Imperfect Duty—one that we must observe only on some occasions.
  - He referred to these as prescriptions (things you may do).
    - "Give to charity."

**FOR EXAMPLE: ADVERTISING AGENCIES SHOULD NEVER LIE.**

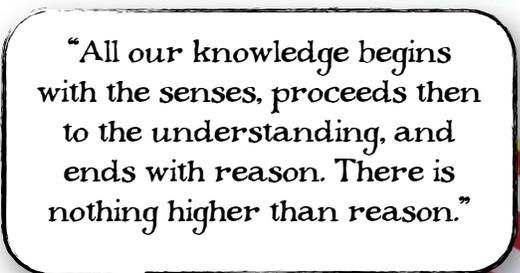
- That's a **PERFECT DUTY** and always binding, no matter what.
- However, Advertising may give to charity if they want to, but they don't have to. That's an **IMPERFECT DUTY**.

The first duty is **ESSENTIAL** to the role of an advertising agency in society. The second would be nice, but it's not as essential as the first.

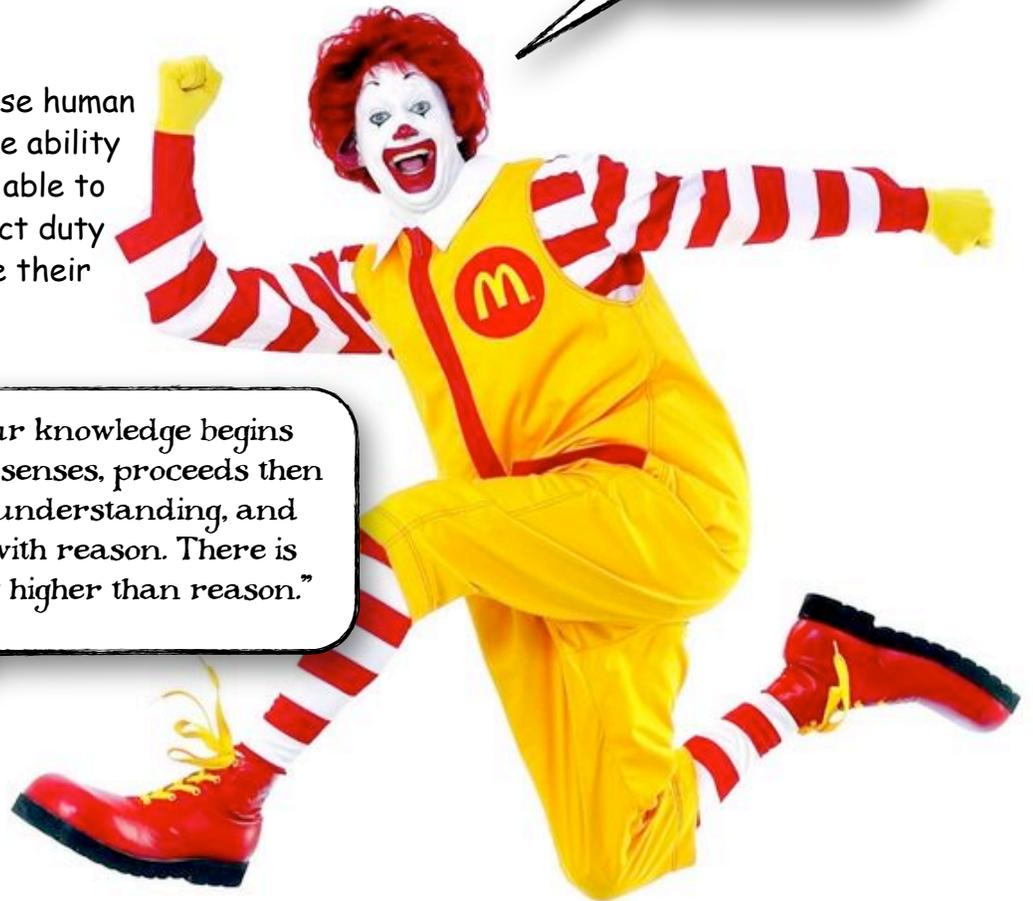
Kant believed that because human beings were born with the ability to reason, they would be able to understand what a perfect duty was and how to discharge their obligation to fulfill it.



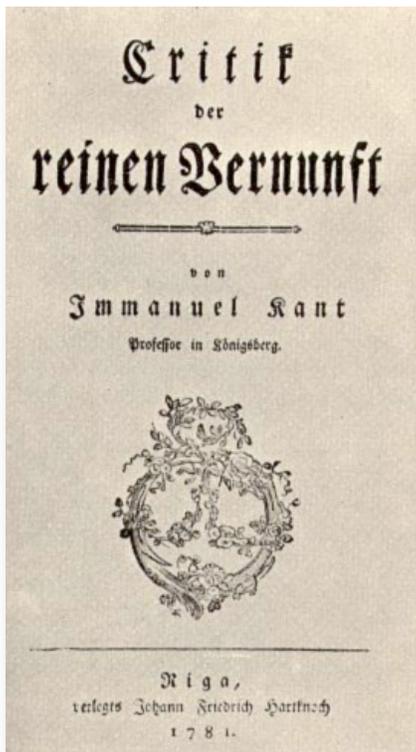
I don't lie,  
AND I give to  
charity! Does that  
make me perfect?



"All our knowledge begins  
with the senses, proceeds then  
to the understanding, and  
ends with reason. There is  
nothing higher than reason."



Kant noted that we all lived by rules most of the time, and some of these he called **CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVES**: unconditional commands that are binding on everyone at all times (perfect duties).



Kant proposed that humans could figure out their own rules of conduct without having to consult "Divine" commandments. Not that he wasn't religious. He just wanted to take some of the burden off God.



Kant's book, **Critique of Pure Reason**. It's in German, which makes it even harder to understand—even if you speak German.

## The Categorical Imperative

"Always act in such a way that the maxim of your action can be willed as a universal law of humanity."

**Maxim** means the principle on which the action was based—the type of principle that people formulate in determining their conduct.



Maxims are subjective rules that guide action. All actions have maxims, such as:

- Never lie to your friends.
- Never act in a way that would make your parents ashamed of you.
- Never kill

So, the idea is to test those common maxims of daily behavior by turning them into **UNIVERSAL RULES**. How? you ask. Thanks for asking...

TO USE THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE, ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS:

- Is the rule your proposing consistently universal and categorical? (It must apply to all people without exception—especially to those who legislate it.)
- Would you be embarrassed to have your actions based on the rule known publicly?
- Have you acted so as to treat yourself and others as ends in themselves and never completely as means to an end? (THIS IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT!)

## KANT BROUGHT THE NOTION OF RESPECT TO THE CENTER OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY FOR THE FIRST TIME.

- To respect people is to treat them as ends in themselves.
- He saw people as autonomous, i.e., capable of giving the moral law to themselves.
- Remember, Kant wanted to show that because of their ability to reason, human beings should be able to construct their own moral laws.
- The opposite of respecting people is treating them as mere means to an end—tools to be used to achieve your own goals without consideration of theirs.

## FOR KANT, THE PROPER OBJECT OF RESPECT IS THE WILL (THE FREE ABILITY TO MAKE A CHOICE).

THUS, RESPECTING A PERSON INVOLVES ISSUES RELATED TO KNOWLEDGE AND FREEDOM. FOR EXAMPLE...

- Not denying them relevant information.
- Allowing them freedom of choice.

THIS IS ESPECIALLY  
IMPORTANT FOR  
PERSUASIVE  
COMMUNICATION.



**ADMITTEDLY, THIS PROCESS ISN'T EASY IF YOU'RE TRYING TO USE THIS APPROACH IN EVERYDAY DECISION MAKING, ON THE FLY.**

- It's easier if you imagine an entire society working from his premise.
- And, if the Categorical Imperative **were** applied to an entire society, what would that society look like?

## **Kant's Kingdom of Ends**

**THE KINGDOM OF ENDS IS A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT THAT PROPOSES A WORLD IN WHICH ALL HUMAN BEINGS ARE TREATED AS ENDS NOT AS MEANS TO AN END FOR OTHER PEOPLE.**

- The Kingdom of Ends is a hypothetical state of existence that is derived from Kant's categorical imperative.
- It is composed entirely of rational beings, whom Kant defines as those capable of moral deliberation.
- In order to be a part of the Kingdom of Ends, these rational beings must choose to act by maxims that imply an absolute moral necessity.
- It is from this point of view that they must judge themselves and their actions.



**KING KANT**

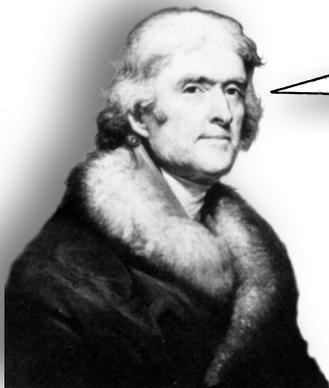
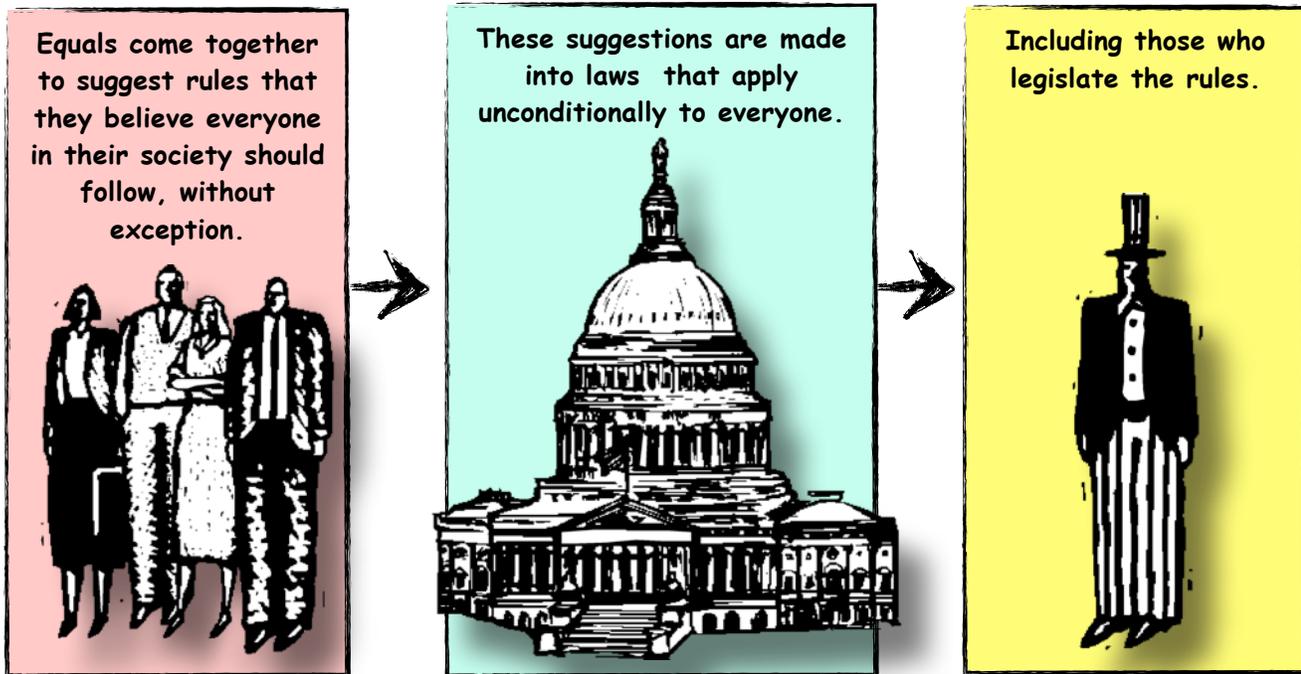
**KANT USES THE TERM "KINGDOM" TO MEAN THE "UNION OF DIFFERENT RATIONAL BEINGS IN A SYSTEM BY COMMON LAWS."**

- These common laws, established by the categorical imperative, are the gauge used to evaluate the worthiness of an individual's actions.
- When all the kingdom's individuals live by the categorical imperative they will treat each other as ends in themselves, instead of means to achieving their own selfish goals.

- People can only belong to the Kingdom of Ends when they develop universal laws for it, and are as subject to those laws as everybody else.
- Such rational beings must regard themselves simultaneously as **Sovereign** when making laws, and as **Subject** when obeying them.
- Morality, therefore, is acting out of reverence for all the universal laws that make the Kingdom of Ends possible.



## SO, HOW DOES THAT WORK AS SOMETHING OTHER THAN A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT?



We'd call it a **DEMOCRACY**. And, I thought of it first.

Actually, I thought of it first.



## STILL, USING THE CATEGORIAL IMPERATIVE APPROACH TO RULE-MAKING ISN'T EASY...

One of the hardest tasks in making a categorical imperative is testing its **universalizability**

- In order to be categorical, a rule must be internally consistent—without contradiction or exception.
- For example: It would be impossible to universalize a maxim that permits lying in journalism.
  - "It's okay to lie when you want/need to."
- However, this maxim cannot consistently be willed as a universal law.

Why? you ask. Thanks for asking.



No. I haven't been hacking your phone. Do I look like a liar?

I know I told you it was okay to lie, but you're fired.

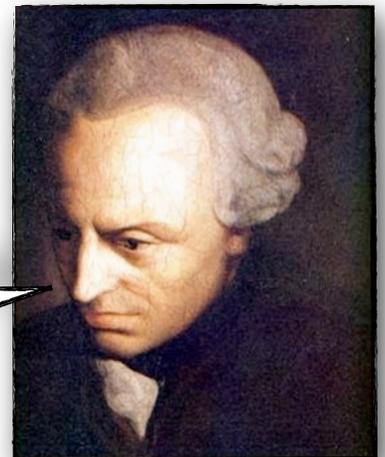


Lying involves **NOT** playing by the rules.

- It undermines itself, destroying the rational expectation of trust it depends on.
  - We trust journalists **NOT** to lie.
- It also allows for arbitrary exceptions based on the new rule "I can lie." For example:
  - Others (including the publisher) could refuse to follow the rules as well, lying to employees (journalists) about anything they felt was necessary.

**AND, THERE'S THE QUESTION OF POTENTIAL EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULES YOU MAKE. AND YOU KNOW WHAT KANT SAID...**

**NO EXCEPTIONS!**



Even though Kant thought categorical duties could have no exceptions, we know today that there can usually be exceptions to most rules—even those that we would otherwise want to be categorical. For example:

We could make an exception of the rule common nearly everywhere,  
**DON'T SPEED IN YOUR CAR.**

Sure, everyone makes an exception once and a while, but can we make an exception that itself could be universalized?

What about for fire trucks and other emergency vehicles?



Or a more famous example from philosopher Hannah Arendt. Would you have lied to Nazi police to protect Jews hiding in your house?



Guess what Kant would have said?

In an essay written near the end of his life, Kant maintained that you are never justified in telling a lie.

- This has to do with **CAUSALITY**—if you do the right thing, you are not responsible for bad outcomes.
- Remember, Kant was all about duties, not consequences.

But, let's put that problem on hold for now and look at another of Kant's uses of the categorical imperative.

**ONE OF KANT'S MOST LASTING CONTRIBUTIONS TO MORAL PHILOSOPHY WAS HIS EMPHASIS ON THE NOTION OF RESPECT.**

Kant brought the notion of **RESPECT** to the center of moral philosophy for the first time.

To respect people is to treat them as ends in themselves. He saw people as autonomous, i.e., capable of giving the moral law to themselves. Remember, Kant wanted to show that because of their ability to reason, human beings should be able to construct their own moral laws.

The opposite of respecting people is treating them as mere means to an end—tools to be used to achieve your own goals without consideration of theirs.

For Kant, the proper object of respect is the **WILL** (the free ability to make a choice). Thus, respecting a person involves issues related to the will—knowledge and freedom. For example...

Not denying them relevant information.

Allowing them freedom of choice.



**CONSIDER THESE  
EXAMPLES...**

A journalist uses a source to get a story, even though the source might be put in danger of losing her job. Would Kant say this is okay?

An advertising agency leaves out important health information in a campaign for fast food. Would Kant say this is okay?

**IN SHORT, KANT BELIEVED THAT IF YOU RESPECT OTHER PEOPLE WHEN MAKING MORAL DECISIONS, IT IS UNLIKELY THAT YOUR DECISIONS WILL BE WRONG ONES.**

# WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM KANT?

## The Admirable Side of Acting from Duty

- The person of duty remains committed, no matter how difficult things become.

## The Evenhandedness of Morality

- Kantian morality does not play favorites. Everyone is bound by the same duties.

## Respecting Other Persons

- The notion of treating persons as ends in themselves is central to much of modern ethics.

# WHERE DID KANT GO WRONG?

## The Neglect of Moral Integration

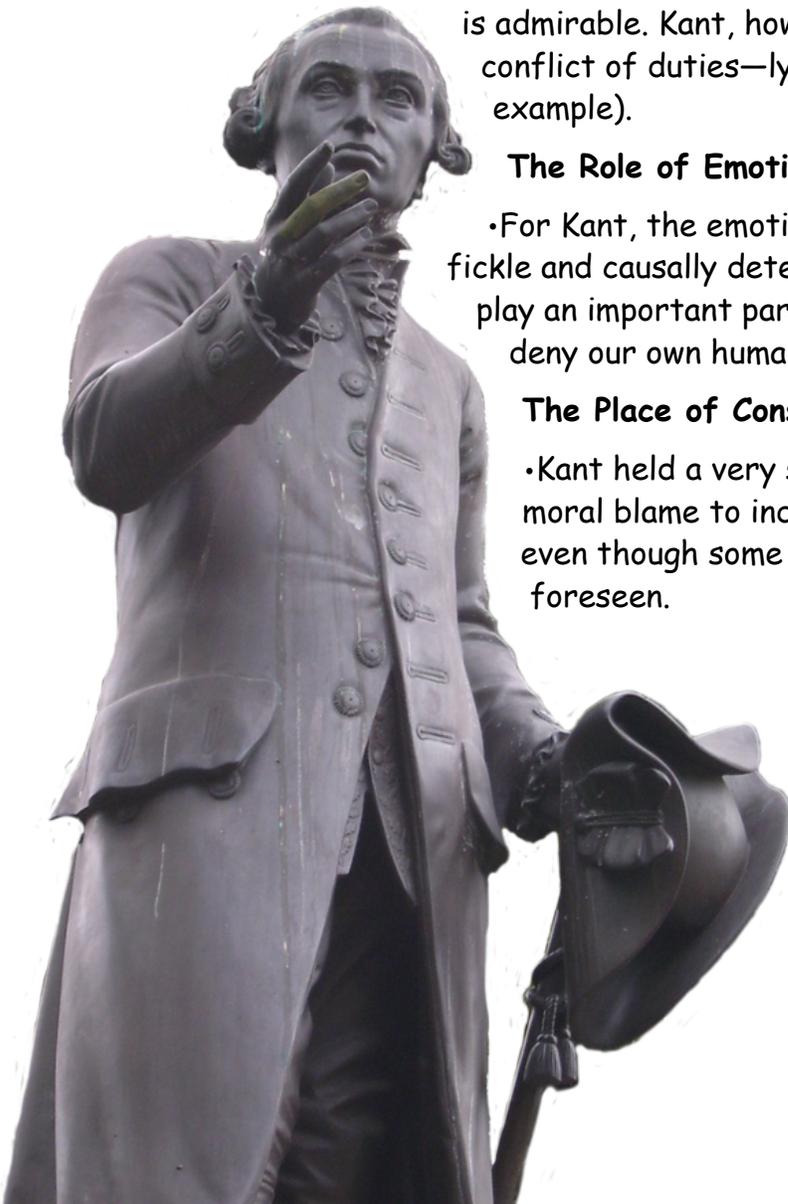
- The person of duty can have deep and conflicting inclinations, but this does not decrease moral worth—indeed, following your duty despite conflicts is admirable. Kant, however, never accounted for potential conflict of duties—lying versus protecting human life (the Nazi example).

## The Role of Emotions

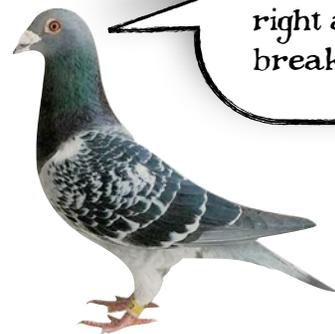
- For Kant, the emotions are always suspect because they are fickle and causally determined and passive. We know that emotions play an important part in our decisions. To deny emotions is to deny our own humanity.

## The Place of Consequences in the Moral Life

- Kant held a very strong position that refused to attach moral blame to individuals who were acting with good will, even though some indirect bad consequences could be foreseen.



And, even Kant isn't impervious to the comments of critical pigeons.



I left a comment just this morning, right after breakfast.

WHEN USING KANTIAN LOGIC TO HELP IN MAKING A MORAL DECISION, ASK YOURSELF WHAT ARE YOUR DUTIES TO OTHERS AND IF THE ACTION YOU ARE TAKING WOULD DISRESPECT ANY OF YOUR CLAIMANTS, ESPECIALLY IF IT VIOLATES THEIR AUTONOMY.

Now, I must go. I'm late for my walk.



The thing for  
us is to do our duty,  
and not worry about  
whether anybody  
sees us or not.

*Mark Twain*

