

Could I rationally will it to be a universal law that no one ever helps anyone else?

- According to Kant, no. You might not want to help anybody else, but (the argument goes), you wouldn't want nobody to help anybody else, because then nobody would help you, which would be to your detriment. So, a rational being could not will this maxim to be a universal law.
 - As Darwall outlines, one way of thinking about this is that perhaps there are some goods that any rational human would need (e.g. social insurance/support), and nobody providing mutual aid would undermine these goods, so a rational being could not will that.
- But it is not so clear-cut as that.
 - I may expect that I do better overall in the world where nobody helps anyone else than the world where mutual aid is provided, because I'm an unusually well-off individual and so the net benefits to me of mutual aid are negative. There doesn't seem to be anything irrational about this behaviour.
- Also, it is possible that I am an individual with certain values (rather than material conditions) which mean that I do in fact endorse/"will" a complete lack of mutual aid.
 - Maybe I am a rugged individualist who abhors the idea of anybody assisting me with my projects. Taking a broad view of "help" meaning "further the interests of" rather than "provide assistance to" might partially get around this issue (other people could leave me to my own devices, thereby furthering my interests), but maybe I actively want others to obstruct me.
 - You could argue that this is irrational, but that is now smuggling in some claims about what the content of rational preferences must be, in a not-very-principled way.
 - Alternatively, you could say that "help" includes hindering where I want to be hindered, but this is now a rather stretched interpretation and not all that useful for moral decision-making (how would I know whether I should "help" someone by assisting or by hindering them?)
- If I can't rationally will M to be a universal law, what are the implications within Kant's theory?
 - To determine if a course of action is permissible, you first turn it into a maxim. Then you ask whether it is self-contradicting if universalised (like, e.g., breaking promises is). On the self-contradicting test, this proposed law does fine: it's entirely possible to conceive of a world where nobody helps anybody else. So, according to Kant, you have at most an imperfect duty to help others.
 - If it is right that I couldn't will M to be a universal law, then I do have an imperfect duty to provide mutual aid. So, at least some of the time and in certain circumstances, I need to help others. (Beyond this, the implications seem limited: Kant doesn't say how often one must perform the imperfect duty, or what the consequences are of failing to do so.)
- One further thing we can conclude from the above discussion is that the answer to the titular question isn't immediately self-evident, and depends on e.g. what you take rationality to require. That counts against Kant's claim that anybody can do morality, using pure reason alone.

Commented [HW1]: This doesn't follow from the previous sentence, at least not on Kant's notion of a maxim. A maxim is supposed to be the principle you're acting by, but it must include your *reason* for acting that way. It's not that merely the principle "Don't help others" cannot be rationally willed to be followed by everyone as though a universal law of nature; it's that you can't rationally will that if you're acting with the end of benefiting yourself—because, if everyone did it, it wouldn't benefit you after all.

Commented [HW2R1]: It's also worth noting that there are two different senses in which something can't be 'rationally willed'. One is that it'd just be a contradiction. (E.g., you can't rationally will that everyone becomes the only person to summit Mt Everest.) The other is that it clashes with your will—that, if everyone did it, you wouldn't get what you wanted out of doing it. The second sort is the one that applies to not helping others in order to benefit yourself.

Commented [HW3]: Yep, good point.

Commented [HW4]: To put this more accurately in Kantian terms, the maxim in question doesn't involve wanting to benefit yourself.

Commented [HW5]: Which has to include the end that you're willing

Commented [HW6]: In either of the two senses of contradiction: contradiction in conception, or contradiction in the will.

Commented [HW7]: I think Kant's view is that it is—that morality (and I guess rationality) only requires what the categorical imperative says.

Confusing things in Kant

- Does he give an actual argument in favour of the good will being the highest good of all?
 - In general don't get this:
 - > This will may therefore not be the single and entire good, but it must be the highest good, and the condition for all the rest, even for every demand for happiness...

Commented [HW8]: Not a good one. But he gives a sort of argument in the first few pages of s1 of the Groundwork. Basically, "1) I can't think of anything else that counts as good. 2) Everything else you might claim is good seems to only be good 'with limitation'--they can lead to evil unless agents have good wills."

- Does Kant have arguments for why actions are morally worthy / esteem-able only when they're done out of duty as opposed to inclination? What does it actually mean for an action to be praiseworthy but lacking in moral content?
 - > But I assert that in such a case [where someone is by inclination beneficent] the action, however it may conform to duty and however amiable it is, nevertheless has no true moral worth... [it] is thus worthy of honour, deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem; for the maxim lacks moral content, namely of doing such actions not from inclination but from duty
 - Darwall p150 gives something of an explanation, perhaps: being motivated by concern for others' welfare doesn't necessarily lead to right actions, except in the case where act-utilitarianism is true.
 - But there seems to be something circular about Kant's argument for the good will being the highest good. Yes, a good person will do good things, but that's just true by definition! It doesn't really tell you how to identify if someone has a good will, or what you ought to do in order to have one. (It feels rather like exhorting someone to "be a virtuous person".) In SEP:
 - > The idea of a good will is closer to the idea of a "good person", or, more archaically, a "person of good will"
 - Maybe you can tell if someone has a good will based on whether the actions you observe them taking are in line with the Categorical Imperative, but then why bother talking about the good will at all? (Also, on a slightly separate point, making moral judgements about others seems entirely infeasible, since you don't have access to their motivations to determine whether they're acting in line with the CI out of duty or out of inclination.)
- Kant claims that we will our own happiness as an end [4:415]. But then he also says that when people use reason to be happy, they end up discontent [4:396]. What's the deal with that?
- Relationship between rationally willing X, X being moral, and desiring X.
 - In SEP
 - > However, mere failure to conform to something we rationally will is not yet immorality. Failure to conform to instrumental principles, for instance, is irrational but not always immoral. In order to show that this maxim [of not developing any of one's talents] is categorically forbidden, one strategy is to make use of several other of Kant's claims or assumptions.
- Why exactly is it a perfect duty to preserve one's life? What is the inconceivable / self-contradictory thing about it being a universal law that nobody preserves their own life?
 - Similarly, why is it a perfect duty to preserve other people's lives? If argument is simply "well, if everybody tried to kill everybody else, eventually there'd be nobody left to kill, so you wouldn't be able to have the maxim being followed", then this seems very shoddy.
- All the secondary readings seem to take it as self-evident that one could not rationally will nobody to help anybody else (see, e.g. Korsgaard p16). This is non-obvious to me.
 - What is so a priori irrational about someone being a rugged individualist who abhors the idea of anybody assisting them with their projects?
 - Perhaps you can adopt a broader meaning of "help" that's defined as "do what furthers the final end of everybody else" (i.e. "do what contributes

Commented [HW9]: I think its because acting out of an inclination isnt really freely willing the act. (Kind of like how hard determinists often think that, since they believe that all actions are determined by external causes, there's no such thing as free will.)

Commented [HW10R9]: But it is pretty weird that the only things we can ever will (at least rationally) are our moral duties. It sure seems like the will is being constrained by morality!

Commented [HW11]: Yeah, I don't think "having a good will" is by definition supposed to say anything about what makes a will good. It's a further substantive claim that a good will is one that acts according to duty.

Commented [HW12]: Yep, this sounds right.

Commented [HW13]: But you'd also have to know their motivations.

Commented [HW14]: Exactly.

Commented [HW15]: He does say that its only a hypothetical imperative. And he might also be drawing a distinction between "having an end" (as he says we have the end of promoting our own happiness) and "purposefully pursuing that end" (in the earlier passage).

Commented [HW16]: Korsgaard's explanation of this is probably one of the clearer ones: "Kant [shows] how the immoral maxims involve a violation of the unconditional value of humanity. Violations of perfect duty occur when the power of rational choice definitive of humanity is made subordinate to other, merely conditional goods. A suicide, for instance, treats his/her own humanity as something he/she can throw away for the sake of his/her comfort."

Commented [HW17R16]: You don't obviously get this duty from the first formulation of the categorical imperative, but only from the second (the one about the "end in itself"). It's questionable whether the 1st formulation implies the 2nd.

Commented [HW18]: I think there are two possibilities. 1) They mean specifically "not helping anybody else because you want to benefit yourself". Or 2) they think that people helping one another is necessary for people to get basic goods that are needed for exercising their rational will (as Darwall suggests).

to their happiness”) and could involve leaving them alone? But I’m still not totally convinced it would be irrational to object to this version either.

- Are you meant to adopt a veil of ignorance-like position when assessing whether you’d rationally will that the maxim M be universalised? (See Darwall p162 and p168 for some discussion, but I don’t think he really presents a solution / answer.)
 - Suppose M is “nobody helps out the neediest” [is this an appropriate form of maxim?]. There’s nothing obviously self-contradictory about M being universalised, so helping out the neediest can’t be a perfect duty. And it seems like I could will M – if I’m a rich person, then why should I want everybody to help out the neediest? But this implies it’s not even an imperfect duty to help the neediest.
 - Where in Kant’s tests does the maxim “everyone should do precisely what is in the interests of Rohan Selva-Radov” fail?
- What does Darwall mean on p154 when describing why egoism can’t be a universal law? I couldn’t follow the argument on this page at all.
 - > note a distinction implicit in [the CI] between what must be true in order for an agent to regard the principle of her will as *law* and what must be true in order for her to regard the principle of her will as *fit to be law*.
- Korsgaard on p10 and p24 talks about synthetic *a priori* propositions, but reading the [SEP article](#) on this didn’t really help with understanding why Kant believed they exist, or why the CI is one. (This might not be very important to his ethics itself?)
- Darwall p156 & pp158-9 helpfully explains that categorical imperatives can include conditional statements, they’re just not allowed to be conditional on an agent having a certain end. But the discussion on p157 about “read[ing a proposition] as a categorical rather than hypothetical imperative” doesn’t make sense to me. Is the claim that a certain string of words can sometimes be interpreted as categorical and sometimes hypothetical? If so, that is strange, and if not, it’s unclear what he is trying to say.
- Duties of virtue vs of justice (Korsgaard p21) – the reasoning behind the typology doesn’t make much sense to me. What makes, e.g., “suicide, physically destructive habits, ... self-deception” a violation of a perfect duty of virtue to oneself, rather than an imperfect duty of virtue or a duty of justice? Why are duties of love to others and duties of respect to others different from each other?
- This seems like a complete non-sequitur to me (Korsgaard, p22). I must be missing something:
 - > Rational beings are the determiners of ends - the ones who set value on things. So a rational being must value rational nature as an end in itself; and it is with this end in view that we act only on maxims which could be universal laws.

Commented [HW19]: I don’t think so.

Commented [HW20]: Needs a motivation, I think.

Commented [HW21]: Depends on the motivation

Commented [HW22]: I think the key bit there is that it need not be the case that an agent *does* will everyone to follow a principle for that principle to be a law. Instead, the categorical imperative just says they must be *able* to rationally will that everyone follow it.

Commented [HW23]: Yeah, its not. Analytic is basically just “by definition” or “true as a matter of logical necessity”. Synthetic is anything that’s not that. But synthetic propositions can still be a priori if we don’t have to go out and do any empirical investigation to figure out if they’re true.

Commented [HW24]: Basically yes, but it’s not super important. It’s a possible way to read them, but categorical imperatives as they’re understood by Kant and in the rest of that chapter are those that cant also be read as hypothetical imperatives.

Commented [HW25]: Pretty sure it’s the fact that you’re undermining your own will for some other, conditional ends.

Commented [HW26]: I think ‘respect’ here might take the more technical meaning, similar to “respecting someone’s rights”. And that duty takes precedence over promoting others’ happiness.

Commented [HW27]: Yeah, I don’t think this is a valid inference. (Though she might just be summarising Kant’s view.)