

## LOGIC, AGENCY, AND PRACTICE: A REVIEW OF RECENT SCHOLARSHIP ON KANTIAN ETHICS

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### Abstract

Critiques contend that Kant's Categorical Imperative amounts to "empty formalism", a system devoid of content that proves insufficient for navigating the practical contingencies of moral life. However, recent scholarship suggests that Kant's ideas remain relevant and should not yet be dismissed. Scholars vigorously argue that his theory remains a sturdy, necessary scaffolding for modern ethics. This review examines that literature to assess how the theory holds up across three specific areas: logic, agency, and practice. First, the theoretical foundation is examined to address the debate about a logical gap in Kant's derivation. The argument here is that the moral law is not derived arbitrarily; it is derived *a priori* as a necessary condition of freedom, meaning practical reason comes pre-loaded with ideals that naturally orient us toward universalisability. Next, the focus shifts to the moral agent. Contemporary scholars are reframing ethics less as rigid commandments and more as a project of "practical identity" and "moral perfection", where duty is experienced as inner restraint or a "feeling of respect". Finally, these formulas are tested against real-world issues including technology, historical racism, and public policy. Ultimately, the suggestion is that the Categorical Imperative is not an obsolete philosophical relic; it is a living analytical tool that protects human dignity from the excesses of utilitarianism and the corrosive effects of modern moral relativism.

**Keywords:** Kant, Ethics, Moral Law, Categorical Imperative, Moral Agent, Logic

## I. Introduction

Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy has a reputation for being intellectually demanding and abstract. As Onora O'Neill (1994) observes, the whole theory is often viewed by students and seasoned scholars alike as "forbiddingly difficult to understand and, once understood, excessively demanding in its requirements" (p. 110). Sitting at the centre of this system is the Categorical Imperative (CI), a supreme moral principle that commands unconditionally, regardless of personal inclination or circumstance. Roger J. Sullivan (1994) reinforces this point, noting that Kant's principal aim in the

Roger J. Sullivan (1994) notes that Kant's main goal in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* was not to construct a system tailored to human inclinations; rather, he intended to "set out the ultimate moral norm and defend its ability to obligate us" (p. 28). The moral law arises from our inner conflict—the tension between competing desires. It presents itself as a command precisely because we are not naturally disposed to do what is right (Sullivan, 1994).

It would, however, be a mistake to dismiss Kantian ethics as a system of rigid, robotic rules. Allen W. Wood (2008) argues that one must look past superficial interpretations of duty to see Kant's broader aim: the creation of a "realm of ends", a rational community in which human goals can be shared and where the dignity of every person is genuinely respected. In this light, the Categorical Imperative is not merely a constraint; it is the necessary prerequisite for autonomy, which Paul Guyer (2006) identifies as the "inner worth of the world" (p. 177). According to Guyer (2006), deriving this law is a way of demonstrating that "the only way we can be free is if we govern our own actions by a law that we give to ourselves" (p. 182).

These implications become particularly significant in comparison with Utilitarianism. Ronald Osei Mensah and Edward Agyemang (2020) point out that while utilitarian ethics pursues the "greatest happiness for the greatest number", a calculation that may sanction the sacrifice of the individual, Kantian ethics remains unyielding on "intrinsic goodness [and] the concept of goodwill" (p. 128). This focus serves as a normative constraint in public policy, ensuring that governments cannot undertake wholesale interventions that treat persons as disposable instruments for some collective end (Mensah & Agyemang, 2020).

For all its defence of dignity, however, the rigidity of the Categorical Imperative has prompted a persistent question: can a rule derived purely from logic and reason provide adequate guidance for the concrete contingencies of moral life? A number of scholars identify what they call a logical "gap" in Kant's reasoning (Mariña, 1998; Reath, 2015). Michael Yudanin (2014) argues that while the CI functions effectively as a filter against impermissible actions, it ultimately fails to generate positive duties, because a purely formal law cannot produce the substantive content of morality on its own. There may, however, be a path through this "empty formalism" objection. Chris McTavish (2010) proposes an "Experiential Approach", arguing that we need to move beyond readings that treat Kant as indifferent to human experience. McTavish (2010) contends that the moral law becomes concrete through the feeling of respect—a distinct moral emotion that humbles the ego and serves as the link between abstract rational principles and lived experience.

Beyond the mechanics of the law, scholars are increasingly attending to the moral agent—the person who acts. Paul Formosa (2017) and Christine Korsgaard (1996) are reframing the entire theory as a project of self-constitution: ethics becomes not a checklist of required actions but an inquiry into “who we ought to become” (Formosa, 2017, p. 2). This shift is indispensable for addressing problems Kant could not have anticipated. From C. Ejeah’s (2022) critique of Kant’s problematic views on race to Andrews Reath’s (2015) analysis of transhumanism, scholars are testing the limits of moral universalism. And Onora O’Neill (1989) pushes back against the assumption that Kantian “justice” ignores “care”, arguing instead that the Formula of Humanity actively requires us to advance the permissible ends of others. By considering these angles—from the logic of freedom to the ethics of care—the Categorical Imperative appears resilient enough to remain philosophically viable in the modern world.

## **II. The Derivation, Logic, and Experience of the Moral Law**

Like most philosophical systems, the entire edifice of Kantian ethics rests on a single critical foundation: the success of its derivation. If the Categorical Imperative (CI) cannot be established as a necessary product of practical reason—if it proves to be merely a plausible idea rather than a binding law—then the entire system risks collapsing into a set of arbitrary prescriptions. It is therefore unsurprising that a significant portion of the literature focuses on the “deduction” of the moral law: that complex logical movement from the abstract concept of a rational will to the specific, action-guiding Formula of Universal Law (FUL). Contemporary scholarship suggests, however, that this derivation is not simply a syllogistic exercise; it is a profound argument about the nature of human freedom and the intrinsic worth of the rational agent.

A central point of contention in this area is the allegation that there is a logical “gap” in Kant’s derivation. As Jacqueline Mariña (1998) explains, critics such as Bruce Aune and Allen Wood have argued that Kant fails to logically bridge the distance between the highly abstract concept of a moral law and the specific requirement that a maxim must be universalisable. The critique holds that a maxim could technically comply with a formal law in a weak sense without actually satisfying the rigorous demands of the CI—that is, without the maxim genuinely passing the test of universalisation as Kant intends it. In other words, a formal principle of consistency alone cannot determine which maxims qualify as genuinely moral, because the very content of the morally required maxim remains underdetermined by logic. This is the gap. Mariña (1998) pushes back against the view that this derivation is therefore defective or that it requires external help, such as Henry Allison’s suggestion to introduce the premise of transcendental freedom. She argues instead that a deep conceptual analysis of unconditioned law naturally yields the strong formulation of the CI: because an unconditioned law must be independent of all subjective desires, the only requirement that remains is that the maxim must include itself as a universal law. This strong requirement of self-inclusion implies that the derivation is, contrary to the critics, logically complete without additional premises (Mariña, 1998).

Andrews Reath (2015) reinforces this defence of Kant’s logic but approaches it from the perspective of rational agency. He challenges the assumption that Kant attempts to build morality from a morally

neutral conception of rationality. Reath (2015) argues that practical reason is not an empty calculator; rather, it contains embedded “ideals of the person, of agency, or of rationality” (p. 385). On this view, the CI is not a strange rule imposed from outside; it represents the fullest expression of the rationality we already employ in everyday practical deliberation (Reath, 2015). The drive to justify our actions to others—to provide reasons that are acceptable to all—is inherent to reason itself (Reath, 2015). Paul Guyer (2006) argues, however, that a complete understanding of the derivation requires one to look beyond logic to the metaphysical necessity of freedom. Guyer (2006) posits that the laws of freedom are effectively the “foundations of Kant’s moral philosophy” (p. 177). The derivation is not merely about logical consistency; it is about establishing that “the only way we can be free is if we govern our own actions by a law that we give to ourselves” (p. 182). The Categorical Imperative thus appears to be the only law compatible with a free will, a conclusion that aligns with Roger J. Sullivan’s (1994) view that the moral law functions as a practical application of the principle of non-contradiction, whereby a rational agent refuses to act on maxims that would undermine the conditions of their own agency.

Allen W. Wood (2008) complicates the picture by warning against a purely “constructivist” interpretation. He argues that the moral law should not be treated as something constructed through rational procedure. Instead, Kantian ethics aims at a kingdom of ends, a system of human purposes that can be rationally shared because the “dignity and welfare of all rational beings are equally included in it” (Wood, 2008, p. 2). This positions the derivation not as empty algebra but as a substantive defence of “intrinsic goodness”—a quality that Mensah and Agyemang (2020) contrast explicitly with the outcome-based logic of Utilitarianism.

Even granting that the derivation is logically and metaphysically sound, scholars continue to debate how this abstract law connects to human experience—a problem sometimes called the issue of “schematism”. Michael Yudanin (2014) critiques the CI as an “empty formalism” incapable of generating positive duties. In response, Chris McTavish (2010) proposes an “Experiential Approach”. McTavish (2010) argues that while the law is derived *a priori*, it must be given concrete form in the sensible world through what he identifies as the “feeling of respect”. This feeling is not a pathological inclination but a distinctive effect of reason on sensibility, humbling self-conceit and reminding the agent that the moral law supersedes self-interest (McTavish, 2010).

In summary, the literature converges on the view that the Categorical Imperative is logically coherent, though its normative force is grounded in several complementary sources. For Mariña and Reath, the power lies in the logic of universality; for Guyer, it lies in the metaphysical necessity of freedom; and for McTavish, it is anchored in the experiential feeling of respect. The moral law is thus not merely a framework for ethical reasoning but the fundamental condition for realising human freedom in a shared realm of ends (Paton, 1948).

### **III. The Moral Agent**

While the logical and formal debates regarding the derivation of the moral law are philosophically indispensable, a significant strand of contemporary scholarship shifts the focus to the person who acts: the moral agent. Recent interpretations of Kant are moving beyond a purely rule-based analysis

to explore deeper questions of identity, character, and self-constitution. In this view, the Categorical Imperative is not an external command imposed by a distant authority; rather, it is the constitutive law of human agency itself. This shift emphasises that the agent is not merely a logical calculator, but a being defined by freedom, intrinsic goodwill, and the lived experience of moral respect.

The foundation of the Kantian agent is the concept of *goodwill*. Ronald Osei Mensah and Edward Agyemang (2020) argue that understanding the moral agent requires grappling with “intrinsic goodness,” a quality that stands in stark contrast to teleological models such as Utilitarianism. While a utilitarian agent is defined by the outcomes they produce (often sanctioning the sacrifice of the individual for the collective), the Kantian agent is defined by the motive of their volition. Mensah and Agyemang (2020) note that the agent must act “out of a sense of duty alone, without resorting to reasons of inclination or self-interest” (p. 128). This establishes the moral agent as a sovereign entity whose worth is not contingent on social utility or on state “wholesale interventions”, but is inherent to their capacity for moral choice (Mensah & Agyemang, 2020).

Paul Guyer (2006) deepens this analysis by identifying freedom as the metaphysical core of the Kantian agent. Guyer (2006) argues that “autonomy is the source of all obligation” (p. 182). The agent does not simply discover the moral law; they enact it as a necessary condition of their own freedom. Guyer (2006) contends that “the only way we can be free is if we govern our own actions by a law that we give to ourselves” (p. 182). On this reading, the moral agent is engaged in a continuous project of rational systematisation, using reason to introduce order and consistency into the competing demands of practical life (Guyer, 2006). The moral agent thus looks less like someone passively following a rulebook and more like someone actively constructing a coherent life characterised by freedom.

This emphasis on self-legislation aligns with Christine Korsgaard’s (1996) constructivist account, according to which obligation arises from “Practical Identity”—the necessity of acting in accordance with the laws one gives oneself in order to maintain integrity as a self-governing agent. Korsgaard (1996) asserts that “Obligation... is the necessity of acting in accordance with the laws we give to ourselves” (p. 41). Allen W. Wood (2008), however, cautions against interpreting the agent as a solitary creator of values. He argues that the Kantian agent is fundamentally social, oriented toward a kingdom of ends in which the agent’s identity is defined by the capacity to share “human ends that can be rationally shared between all people” (Wood, 2008, p. 2). This counters charges of solipsism by insisting that the genuine moral agent recognises the dignity and welfare of all rational beings as constitutive of their own self-conception (Wood, 2008).

Perhaps the most significant enrichment of the concept of the moral agent comes from McTavish’s (2010) “Experiential Approach”. McTavish challenges the formalist reading that depicts the Kantian agent as an unfeeling mechanism. He argues instead that the moral agent is defined by a specific affective state: the feeling of respect, which is crucial because it humbles self-conceit—the natural tendency to place oneself above others (McTavish, 2010). The moral agent is therefore not merely a being who reasons about the law, but one who feels its weight as a counterforce to self-interest. Karif Jal Basara (2018) further strengthens this view by introducing a psychological dimension to the exercise of will, noting that duty implies “inner rational self-constraint” (p. 8).

Finally, Onora O’Neill (1989) expands the conception of the agent by emphasising human finitude. While the Kantian agent is rational, O’Neill (1989) reminds us that human beings are also “finite” and “vulnerable” creatures who cannot sustain themselves in isolation. This necessitates a transition from strict justice to virtue. O’Neill (1989) argues that Kant’s Formula of Humanity generates imperfect duties requiring agents to promote the permissible goals of others, not merely to refrain from harming them. Because agents are not self-sufficient, genuine respect for agency requires mutual support and care, not simply non-interference. This integrates the ethics of care into the core of the Kantian account of agency, presenting a moral person who is rational and free, yet embedded in a web of mutual dependence and imperfect duties of virtue (O’Neill, 1989).

#### **IV. From Theory to Application**

Having examined the nature of the moral law and the moral agent, the review turns to the complex question of practical applicability. How does so abstract a principle actually guide specific and complicated human actions? Onora O’Neill (1994) offers the standard framework for making the Formula of Humanity action-guiding. She distinguishes between using someone as a “means”—an ordinary and permissible feature of human cooperation—and using someone as a “mere means” (p. 111). This violation occurs when one involves another person in a scheme, typically through deception or coercion, “to which they could not in principle consent” (O’Neill, 1994, p. 112).

Mensah and Agyemang (2020) extend this analysis from the interpersonal sphere to the political domain. They argue that the Kantian prohibition on using persons as “mere means” constitutes a vital bulwark against the utilitarian tendency of governments to sacrifice the few for the benefit of the many. In the realm of public policy, this requires that governments neither pursue policies for their own ends nor undertake sweeping measures that treat individuals merely as instruments rather than as ends-in-themselves (Mensah & Agyemang, 2020). A utilitarian calculus might sanction the exploitation of a minority group for some “greater good”; the Kantian application resists this by insisting that every individual counts (Mensah & Agyemang, 2020).

Allen W. Wood (2008) acknowledges the prevalent critique that the Formula of Humanity is “too vague or murky to provide practical guidance” (p. 3). In response, Wood (2008) argues that this objection reflects what he calls “Sidgwickian Expectations”—a demand for the kind of algorithmic precision that ethics is constitutionally incapable of providing. He reframes the practical application entirely: the formula functions not as a rulebook but as a moral compass pointing toward a commonwealth in which all rational agents must navigate together (Wood, 2008).

A significant enhancement to the practical application of Kantian ethics comes from O’Neill’s (1989) analysis of famine and justice. Critics often view Kantian ethics as a cold system of perfect duties that neglects care and positive assistance. O’Neill (1989) rejects this characterisation, arguing that the Formula of Humanity requires not only that we refrain from using others but that we actively support their projects. This generates a positive duty of beneficence—an obligation to be helpful, not merely harmless. Focusing solely on rights and non-interference, O’Neill (1989) contends, is insufficient; a genuinely Kantian agent adopts and advances the permissible ends of others.

The practical force of these concepts is vividly illustrated in engineering ethics. Ibo van de Poel and Lambèr Royakkers (2011) apply the “mere means” test to the infamous Ford Pinto case. In the 1970s, Ford rushed the subcompact vehicle to market to compete with Japanese imports. The fuel tank was placed behind the rear axle, close to the bumper, and internal tests showed that the tank could rupture and ignite in rear crashes above 20 mph. This led to multiple deaths and injuries. Van de Poel and Royakkers (2011) argue that Ford’s decision to sell an unsafe vehicle violated the Categorical Imperative not simply because it caused harm, but because Ford withheld information. By deceiving customers, Ford denied them the autonomy to make informed decisions—effectively robbing them of their capacity for rational self-legislation. A modern parallel is the Boeing 737 Max case, in which Boeing concealed the behaviour of the Manoeuvring Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS) from both regulators and pilots. The system’s tendency to push the nose of the aircraft downward under certain conditions was not disclosed, contributing to two fatal crashes and the deaths of 346 people (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021). This aligns with Guyer’s (2006) assertion that freedom is the “inner worth of the world”; systematic deception deprives agents of their capacity to self-legislate. In both cases, the Kantian analysis converges on the requirement of informed consent as the foundational standard of ethical conduct in technology.

Roger J. Sullivan (1994) grounds these practical applications in the necessity of judgment. In demonstrating that the CI constitutes genuine practical reasoning rather than a vague aspiration, he presents the CI as a three-step practical syllogism applicable to any proposed action. The review focuses on two illustrative syllogisms.

### **Syllogism I:**

**Major Premise:** Act only on that maxim through which you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law. (Kant’s Formula of Universal Law)

**Minor Premise:** To maximise profit, we will market products we know will cause avoidable deaths if fixing them costs more than paying for lawsuits.

**Test:** Every company sells known-lethal products when repair costs exceed litigation costs.

**Result:** Trust in commerce collapses; it becomes impossible to sell such products, and, more fundamentally, no rational agent can coherently will their own death.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, we will not proceed with the product.

### **Syllogism III (the invalid version):**

**Major Premise:** Act to bring about the best consequences.

**Minor Premise:** To maximise profit, we will market products we know will cause avoidable deaths if fixing them costs more than paying for lawsuits.

**Reasoning:** “If we make more profit, the company will increase salaries and donate to charity.”

**Conclusion:** Therefore, we will proceed with the product.

Sullivan (1994) warns against the error of Syllogism III, in which agents attempt to disguise consequentialist reasoning as an application of the CI. This is the invalid formulation that effectively converts Kant into a crude consequentialist. Sullivan argues that while the Categorical Imperative tests the universalisability of general maxims, applying it to specific cases requires moral judgment and experience, not mechanical logical deduction (Sullivan, 1994).

## V. Contemporary Critiques and Adaptations

Contemporary scholarship has forced a reckoning with significant tensions within Kant's original framework. Three areas are of particular importance: the contradictions between Kant's moral universalism and his documented racial prejudices; the perceived gap between "justice" and "care"; and the application of the moral law to emergent questions about the future of human nature.

A particularly pressing critique concerns the compatibility of Kant's universalism with his own historical racism. C. Ekeh (2022) points out that "Kant's philosophy of race, if taken literally, undermines the moral universalism that the Categorical Imperative claims to uphold" (p. 1). Allen W. Wood (2008) responds by observing that the Enlightenment project as a whole was engaged in an ongoing struggle to liberate itself from inherited prejudices. While Kant's personal views were morally indefensible, Wood (2008) argues that Kant's ethical theory paradoxically provides the very tools required for "mutual respect and free communication" (p. 2). This response, however, does not exhaust the debate. Scholars such as Pauline Kleingeld and Charles W. Mills have argued that the tension between Kant's anthropological writings and his moral universalism is not merely biographical but structural, and cannot be dissolved simply by appealing to the internal logic of the CI. Kleingeld's (2007) careful analysis demonstrates that Kant substantially revised his explicitly racist positions in his later writings, yet the tensions between his empirical anthropology and his moral philosophy remain a subject of active scholarly dispute.

A full engagement with these competing accounts is beyond the scope of the present review; interested readers are directed to Kleingeld (2007) and Mills (2005) for a more rigorous treatment.<sup>1</sup>

Parallel to the racial critique is the feminist objection that Kant's focus on abstract "justice" wholly ignores the ethics of care. Onora O'Neill (1989) challenges this view, arguing that the Formula of Humanity actively generates imperfect duties to care for others and to support their permissible goals. Beyond questions of social justice, the literature also addresses the challenge of ethical relativism, or what Edward Uzoma Ezedike (2020) terms "moral promiscuity" (p. 128)—the risk that abandoning foundational principles in favour of pure pluralism allows individuals to select whichever ethical principle serves their self-interest. Mensah and Agyemang (2020) reinforce this

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<sup>1</sup> On Kant's evolving racial views, see Pauline Kleingeld, "Kant's Second Thoughts on Race," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 57(229), 573–592 (2007). Kleingeld's analysis demonstrates that Kant substantially revised his explicitly racist views in his later moral and political writings, though the tension between his anthropological and moral works remains a subject of vigorous scholarly debate. See also Charles W. Mills, "Kant's Untermenschen," in *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Valls (Cornell University Press, 2005), 169–193.

concern by contrasting the necessary, universal character of Kantian ethics with the empirical contingency of utilitarian calculation.

The question of strict moral absolutism presents its own difficulties in the context of modern moral sensibilities. Chris McTavish (2010) offers a constructive adaptation through his “Experiential Approach”. McTavish (2010) argues that to rescue Kant from charges of “dogmatism, formalism and rigorism” (p. 1), one must attend carefully to how the moral agent actually experiences the moral law, not merely how the law is formally derived.

Finally, the adaptability of the Categorical Imperative is being tested by the rise of Transhumanism—the cultural and philosophical movement that advocates the radical biological enhancement and optimisation of human capacities through technology. Andrews Reath (2015) applies the moral law to the goals of radical enhancement, warning that placing technology above humanity risks undermining the very dignity that grounds moral obligation. This critique is supported by Guyer’s (2006) metaphysical reading, in which freedom represents the “inner worth of the world” (p. 177). If technological enhancement diminishes the capacity for self-legislation by transforming the human agent into an optimised biological mechanism, it arguably violates the fundamental conditions of freedom (Guyer, 2006).

## **VI. Conclusion**

The review presented in this paper suggests that Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperative (CI) remains a resilient and philosophically indispensable framework in moral philosophy. While persistent objections have characterised the principle as an “empty formalism” incapable of guiding action, the literature examined here demonstrates that the principle is logically coherent, experientially grounded, and practically adaptable. As H.J. Paton (1948) argued, the Categorical Imperative is not a foreign imposition but “the law of a free will,” representing the necessary structure of practical reason itself (p. 211).

The theoretical defence of the CI has proven substantial. Scholarship by Jacqueline Mariña (1998) and Andrews Reath (2015) successfully refutes the charge that Kant’s derivation contains a damaging logical gap. Paul Guyer (2006) elevates this defence from logic to metaphysics, concluding that the ultimate aim of Kant’s system is to establish that “autonomy is the source of all obligation” (p. 182). Furthermore, the literature reveals a significant shift from viewing the moral law as a static rulebook toward viewing it as a guide to human agency, identity, and experience. Whether through Paul Formosa’s (2017) ideal of *moral perfection* or Chris McTavish’s (2010) “Experiential Approach”, the moral law is understood as something felt as well as thought.

On the practical and political level, the review confirms that the Categorical Imperative serves as a vital safeguard against the excesses of consequentialism. Mensah and Agyemang (2020) argue that the Kantian focus on “intrinsic goodness” provides a necessary check on public policy, resisting “wholesale interventions” that would sacrifice the individual to the collective good. Simultaneously, Onora O’Neill (1989) dispels the view that Kantianism constitutes a cold “ethics of justice” indifferent to “care”, demonstrating that the Formula of Humanity generates active duties of

beneficence that bridge the gap between rights and virtue. As the Enlightenment project continues to reckon with its own historical prejudices, the Categorical Imperative remains the central touchstone for any ethical theory that seeks to ground human dignity not in contingent desires but in the unshakeable foundations of freedom and reason.

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