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Immanuel Kant (Reference Entry)

Harry van der Linden
Butler University, hvanderl@butler.edu

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THE DOCTRINE OF REVELATION

After the first destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem, and particularly after its second destruction, the scriptures served as a focus for the religious devotion of the Jews. Their state no longer existed; their culture had been destroyed. All that remained was their belief in God and his word. If the Jewish religion were to endure, it seemed necessary that not only the content of revelation but also even its physical form should be considered inviolate and unchangeable. The level on which mystics interpreted revelation to serve their purpose was highly symbolical. To make this interpretation possible, the Kabbalists developed letter and number symbolism of great variety, complexity, and obscurity.

THE DOCTRINE OF REDEMPTION

The Kabbalists maintained and even intensified the traditional Jewish view of redemption. In the Kabbalistic view, salvation of the individual was of little significance. It entered only as a means to the greater end of the salvation of humankind. This would come about through the agency of a messiah and the Davidic line, who would lead the Jews in triumph to the Holy Land and inaugurate a reign of truth, justice, and mercy. The ideal of salvation is thus the establishment of an earthly paradise of human life, raised to its highest humanity. Other elements clouded this doctrine at various times in the history of mystical messianism. In general, however, the Kabbalistic view of redemption was an extreme form of traditional messianism. Attempts to calculate the exact date of the coming of the messiah were widespread. The coincidence of various calculations in fixing on dates close to each other inspired a wave of messianic movements.

Genevieve Slomski

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SEE ALSO: Hasidism; Jewish ethics; Messianism; Talmud; Torah.

Kant, Immanuel

IDENTIFICATION: German philosopher
BORN: April 22, 1724, Königsberg, Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia)

DIED: February 12, 1804, Königsberg, Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia)

TYPE OF ETHICS: Enlightenment history

SIGNIFICANCE: In *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1785), *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), and especially the *Three Critiques* (1781-1790), Kant synthesized rationalism and empiricism into a single philosophical system that stood as the culmination of Enlightenment thought. He argued for the existence of a universal and objective moral law, the categorical imperative, which had the form of law as such and therefore transcended any individual human concern or value.

Late in his life, after his revolutionary work in epistemology, Kant first presented his mature moral philosophy in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Here, Kant developed his influential idea that human beings as rational agents are "autonomous," or have the capacity for moral self-government. For Kant, autonomy means that, as rational beings, people set their own standards of conduct, as distinct from the demands made by their desires, and are able to decide and act on these standards. On the basis of a complex argument, Kant concluded that autonomy is possible only if the will is guided by a supreme principle of morality that he called the "categorical imperative." Kant viewed this imperative as the product of reason

and as the basis for determining moral duties. He expressed it in three basic formulations.

THE FORMULA OF UNIVERSAL LAW

“Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” Kant defined a maxim as a subjective principle on which a person intends to act, and a universal law as a principle that applies to everyone. Therefore, his formula of universal law demands that one act only on maxims that one can rationally will that everyone adopt. Kant provided the following example of how to use the formula: Suppose that a person must borrow money for a personal need and knows that he is unable to repay it. Is it morally permissible for him to act on the maxim of falsely promising to pay back a loan in order to get the loan? The formula tells that the person may act on the maxim if he can rationally will its universalization. The person cannot rationally will this because it would mean that people would no longer trust promises to repay loans, including his own. Kant added that the immorality of the maxim is clear in that the person really wants people to keep their promises so that he can be an exception to the rule for this one occasion.

THE FORMULA OF HUMANITY

“Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.” For Kant, “humanity” refers to people’s uniquely human characteristics, their rational characteristics, including autonomy and the capacity to understand the world and to form and pursue life-plans. Thus, his formula of humanity demands that people always act so that they respect themselves and others as beings with a rational nature.

In *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant used the formula of humanity to argue for a variety of duties to oneself and others. According to Kant, respect for rational nature in oneself implies that one ought not to destroy or deny one’s intellectual and moral capacities through suicide, drug abuse, lying, self-deception, or servility. It also implies that one must further one’s own rational nature by developing one’s natural talents and striving to be-



Immanuel Kant. (Library of Congress)

come virtuous. Respect for rational nature in others requires that one not harm them and that one uphold their individual liberty, but Kant discussed these duties as part of his legal and political philosophy. More exclusive ethical duties to others include the duty to contribute to the flourishing of rational nature in others through beneficence and the duty to refrain from arrogance, defamation, ridicule, and other activities that deny people’s humanity.

THE FORMULA OF THE REALM OF ENDS

“All maxims . . . ought to harmonize with a possible realm of ends.” This formula shows that the two previous formulas are interconnected. (Kant held them all to be equivalent, but this has not been widely accepted.) Kant described the realm of ends as a harmony between human beings, resulting from each acting only on maxims that can become universal laws. It is a harmony of ends in that its members, by acting only on universalizable maxims, act only on maxims that can meet everyone’s consent; thus,

they respect one another as rational self-determining agents, or ends in themselves. It is also a harmony of ends in that people will seek to further one another's individual ends.

MORAL VISION

Kant held that people must mirror the realm of ends in their moral choices and actions, and that it is humanity's duty to bring about this ideal. He viewed the French Revolution and the Enlightenment as steps in the right direction; argued for a worldwide league of democratic states as a further step toward the realm of ends; and claimed, moreover, that the religious institutions of his time must embrace the ideal, setting aside their historically evolved differences. Kant maintained that moral philosophy must not formulate new duties, but should only clarify the moral principle operative in "common moral reason" in order to help ordinary persons more adequately resist immoral desires. Kant's clarification went beyond these confines, however, and it ended with an inspiring moral vision of the realm of ends as the purpose of history, the kingdom of God on Earth, and the ultimate individual and collective vocation.

Harry van der Linden

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SEE ALSO: Autonomy; Consistency; Deontological ethics; Duty; Enlightenment ethics; *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*; Kantian ethics; Post-Enlightenment ethics; Practical reason; Transcendentalism.

Kantian ethics

DEFINITION: Moral system put forward by, or modeled after that of, Immanuel Kant

TYPE OF ETHICS: Enlightenment history

SIGNIFICANCE: Kantian ethics are concerned with the determination of an absolute and universal moral law and with the realization or modeling of an ideal society characterized by the mutual respect and harmonious coexistence of all moral agents.

The term "Kantian ethics" is commonly used to refer to the ethics of Immanuel Kant, as set forth in his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* and other moral writings of the 1780's and 1790's. The term is also frequently used to refer to later moral theories that are similar to Kant's ethics but contain modifications in response to its perceived shortcomings. Three important examples are the moral theories of Hermann Cohen, John Rawls, and Jürgen Habermas.

IMMANUEL KANT

The ultimate purpose of moral rules, Kant argued, is to make possible his ideal society, the "realm of ends," which has two main aspects: All its members respect one another as self-determining agents who pursue different individual ends, and they seek to promote one another's ends. Kant believed that this