

## **Kant: Saving Others**

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The philosopher Immanuel Kant held the idea of ‘duty’ to be of utmost importance when it came to ethics. This duty-centered approach to ethics is known as a “deontological” one, as opposed to an end-result based ethics known as being “teleological.” This essay will define Kant’s use of ‘duty,’ ‘oughts,’ ‘obligations,’ ‘merit,’ and ‘partiality,’ and the application of these terms to such examples as saving a child from drowning and saving a child on the other side of the world by donating to a charitable organization. In each of these two cases, Kant’s concept of ‘merit’ will be considered. Any contentions I have with Kant’s ethical approach with the given examples will be provided respectively.

By ‘duty,’ Kant meant ‘moral obligation’ to act, and this entails the understanding that the action can be done. ‘Duty’ is, then, an action in which one is bound and obligated to do (15). More specifically, ‘duty’ is an a priori proposition. Kant divided the concept of ‘duty’ into two parts. The first and primary ‘duty’ is a ‘perfect duty,’ which means a negative obligation to one’s self and others without inclinations to natural or empirical evidence, such as not to kill one’s self, not murdering others, not lying, not stealing, etc. Perfect duties to others can also be of ‘respect’ (209-211). These are universal to all humans, by their very virtue of being human. This also includes not having contempt for people, meaning to treat people as though they lack dignity or absolute worth. Intentionally not fulfilling perfect duties is a ‘vice’ (153).

The second, lesser, 'duty' is an 'imperfect duty,' which means duties to one's own perfection and happiness, and to the perfection and happiness of others. Imperfect duties to others is also known as being of 'love' (201-203). Failing to fulfill imperfect duties only qualifies for a lack of virtue and not condemnable. These 'imperfect duties' are not 'obligations,' rather they are 'oughts.' 'Oughts' are synthetic a priori propositions. When a person 'ought' to do something, it means that they are able to do that and are more moral for doing it, but are under no strict obligation to do so. Additionally, Kant stipulated that it is through 'reason,' which is a priori like morality, that is best to arrive at clearly defined morals, and that people are morally obligated to obey the dictates of 'reason.'

According to Kant, a person is considered 'morally good' if and only if he acts out of duty rather than any inclination or for a particular end such as happiness. Whereas to be worthy of happiness is simply the consequence of being a morally virtuous person. 'Virtue' is determined by acting out of duty alone. 'Merit' is measured by one acting out of duty and doing more than an imperfect duty or moral law requires. When one does only what the law requires he is not meritorious, he is simply doing what is required of him. When one does less than the said law or perfect duty requires, he is deemed culpable (19).

Kantian ethics does not hold that one must sacrifice all that they have, whether time, energy, or money, to everyone or even equally. To a certain degree, this is due to the concept of 'partiality.' One may be deemed 'meritorious' for helping people under the right circumstances and doing more than the minimum, but it is not possible to help

everyone equally. So, it is said that it is more practical to help those that are physically or geographically closer to one's self than further away. Such an example of helping others closer would be first financially assisting one's children when they are in need as college students before donating money to a faraway non-profit in Antarctica. Donating, or helping those in need, financially is, again, not a Kantian ethical requirement, but donating is a gesture of love if done out of a sense of duty and nothing else. Thus, Kant says that a donating act of this kind is deserving of 'merit.'

The first example is that of saving a drowning child with little inconvenience to one's self and no risk to her own life. Let us suppose that this heroine is already on the beach in proper swimming attire, is a fantastic swimmer, and is of a normal mental state, i.e. sober, sane, conscious, and cognitive. Out in the water is a child who is not a good swimmer and is not of any relation to the woman, so no words of commitment to the child were ever given as a condition of promise. The child is bobbing over and under the waves and is struggling for air while yelling for help. The woman sees the child drowning in the distance. In this given scenario, it is first asked if Kant views it as an obligation to save the child. The second question would be whether the woman would get any merit if she did save the child.

To answer the first question, Kantian ethics does not hold that the woman, or anyone, is morally obligated to save the child as 'obligations' are for purely 'perfect duties,' or 'negative duties.' As for the second question concerning whether the woman would get 'merit' if she did save the drowning child, the answer would also be, "No." Merely saving the child would be, according to Kant, the bare minimum of a moral act, as

long as there was no inclination or alternative motives involved. To be worthy of ‘merit,’ she must do more than what is the required minimum. Accordingly, Kant would say that by saving the child without inclination, the woman would only have been showing herself as being a ‘virtuous person.’

Whereas I agree with Kant that there are no true obligations to help others, I disagree with Kant that people are only ‘meritorious’ for going above and beyond expectations. I also disagree with tying the words “obligation” and “duty” to “moral obligation” and “moral duty,” as “obligation” and “duty” indicate that there is someone or something that has authority, and power, to enforce the action through coercion or punishment, making it obligatory or dutiful. Morality, in order to be justified, must be free from coercion to allow an autonomous being to make the choice. Any act of “morality,” e.g. helping or saving others from drowning, would then be ‘meritorious’ because it is more than the negative state of merely existing, i.e. ‘perfect duty,’ requires.

The second example is that of saving a child in a third world country from starving by committing one’s self to a long-term donation of only fifty cents per day, and this would be of no real sacrifice or inconvenience to our heroine in this case. Again, as before, Kant would say there is no obligation to help this child. If the female hero were to sign up for the commitment of fifty cents per day to only satiate the child’s hunger, it would still be bare minimum, making her act ‘virtuous’ and not deeming ‘merit.’ If the small financial charitable act did more than the bare minimum, then Kant would say the act was ‘meritorious.’ This credit of ‘merit’ would first depend on the concept of ‘partiality,’ that there was not someone else closer that she could help in her life; and it

would require that her act of giving was from 'duty,' meaning also without inclination.

As with my first given contention with Kant's concept of 'merit,' I hold that in this scenario of helping a starving child overseas as being 'meritorious,' but to a lesser degree than the first scenario. My reason is that the drowning child had immediate danger to losing their life and something could be done by fewer people on the beach. Perhaps, even, the heroine was the only person on the beach, making her efforts all that much more important for the life of the child. As for the starving child case, there are, by far more, many people that can afford to help prevent them from starving to death, and these people are willing to do so from duty without inclination. This is not to say that donating is not 'meritorious,' rather it is a lesser degree of 'virtue' and 'merit,' due to the simplistic principle of supply and demand in the second scenario. There are more people and more resources to draw from around the world that can help the one starving child than there were people on the beach to save the drowning child.

Overall, Kant held much stricter guidelines as to who deserved 'merit' for acts of generosity or kindness compared to what I would call being, 'morally good,' or 'morally virtuous.' I agree with Kant that our utmost important negative duty in life, i.e. 'perfect duty,' is to not harm others or ourselves. I disagree with what determines a 'meritorious' or 'virtuous' person.

### Works Cited

Kant, Immanuel. *Kant: The Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge, 2012.