Kantianism in 90 Seconds

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Kantianism, named after the 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant, is a deontological ethical theory, which, basically, means that actions are considered morally right or wrong in and of themselves, regardless of their consequences.

Kant used, what he called, the categorical imperative, or “absolute command,” to determine what was morally right or wrong. According to Kant, there is only one categorical imperative, but he presents it in three different formulations, as follows:

First, the principle of the law of nature focuses on universalizability. In short, it says that we should act as if our actions will become a universal law of nature. In other words, if anyone else were to be in similar circumstances to ours, they would be required to act in exactly the same manner.

The second formulation is the principle of ends, which says that we should always treat human beings, including ourselves, as if they are an end in and of themselves, and never only as means to an end. In other words, we should respect others and not simply use them to accomplish our own purposes.

The third formulation is the principle of autonomy, which says we are not dependent upon others to tell us what is right and wrong, but that we are free and able to discover this for ourselves through the use of reason.

Kant’s theory is absolutist, which means that it consists of exceptionless rules. One common criticism of Kantianism is that, although it rightly emphasizes justice and the need for consistent rules, it is too rigid and can lose sight of the purpose of ethics as a means to promote human well-being.

And that’s Kantianism…in 90 seconds.