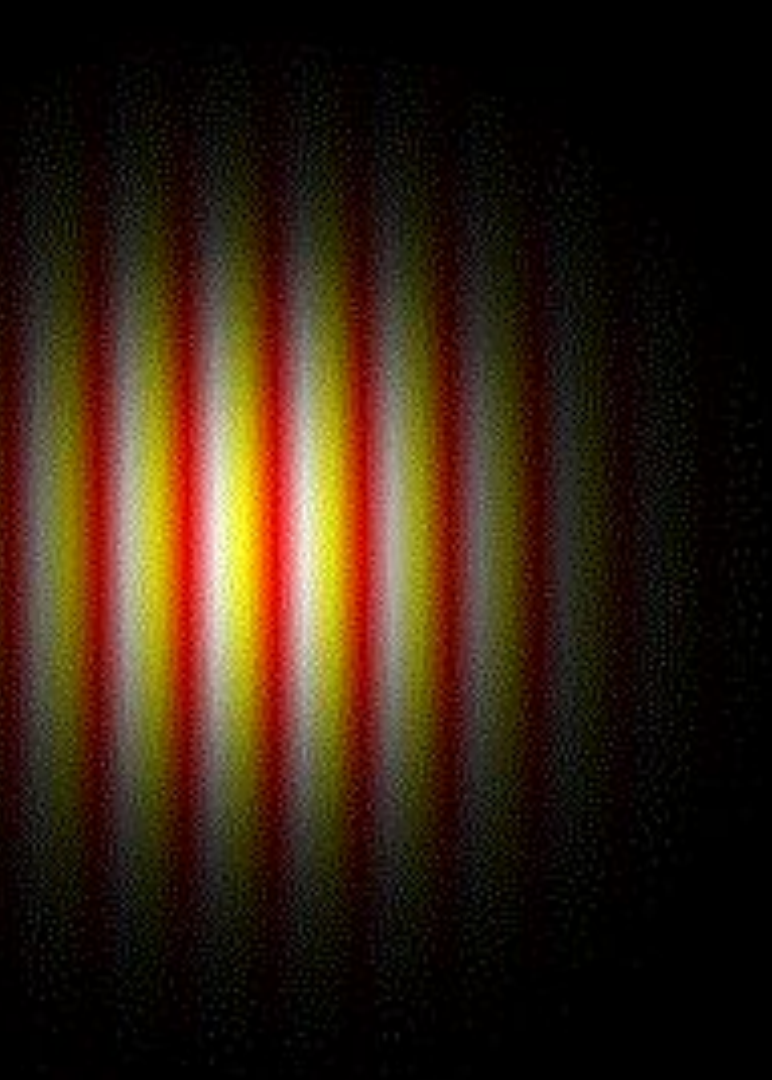


The Kingdom of Ends

1785

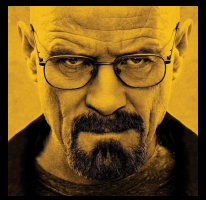
What is knowledge?

Does God exist?

PoE

Do we have free will?

Do we only act from self-interest?



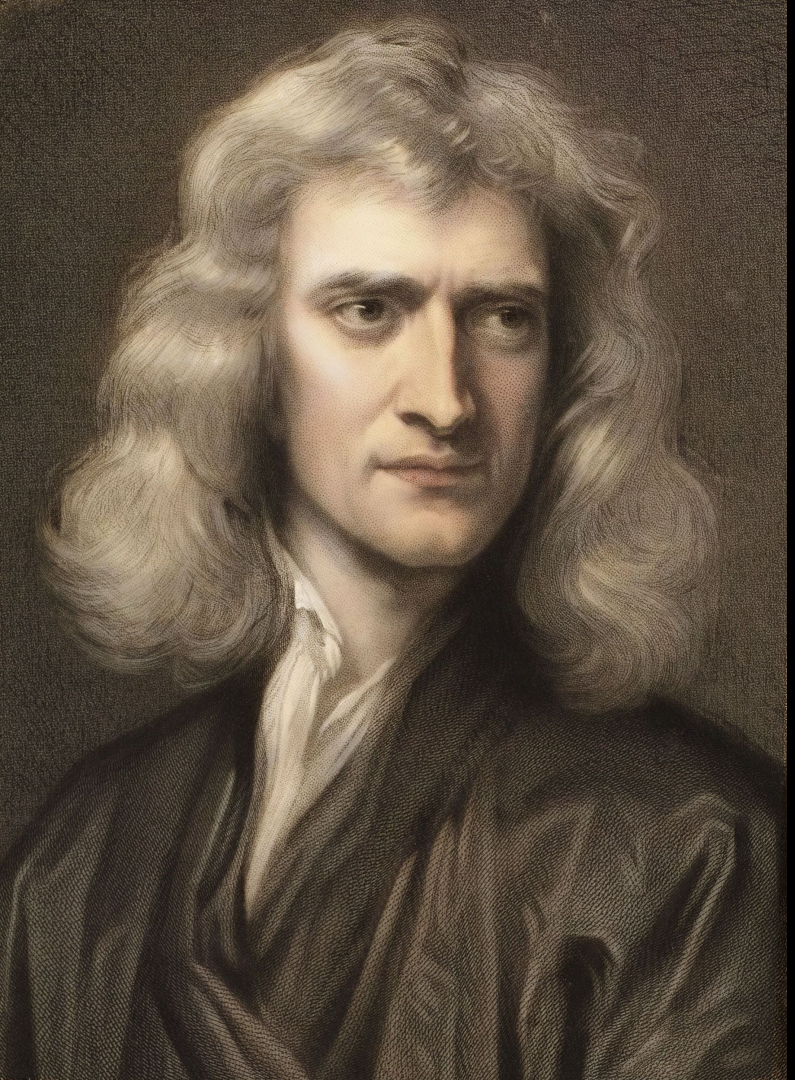
Is morality relative?

Empiricism Or Rationalism?

Possible Solutions:

1. Free Will
2. Morality
3. Eastern Philosophy

Kant and Deontology:
Important Concepts

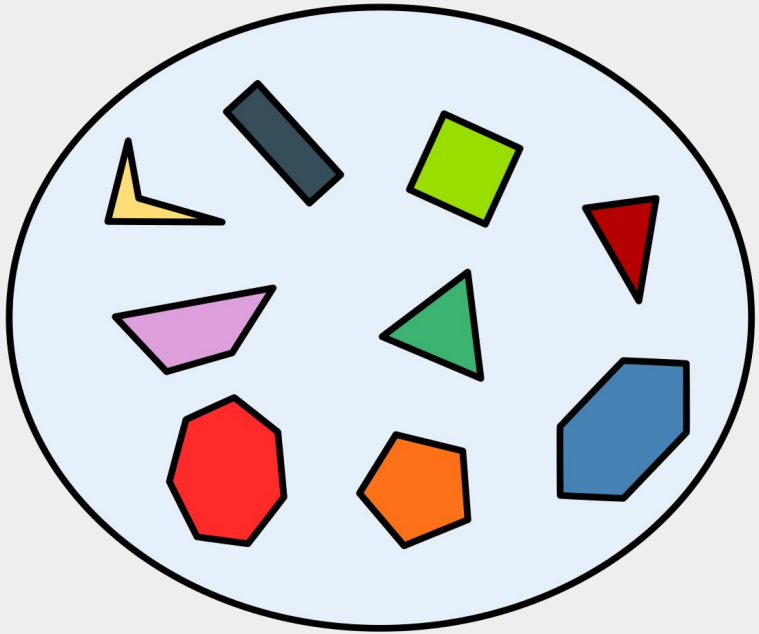


Kant is best understood in the context of the crisis of the Enlightenment:
newfound confidence in reason, beginning with the groundbreaking work of Isaac Newton, was leading many to question various traditional authorities, such as the clergy and the state.

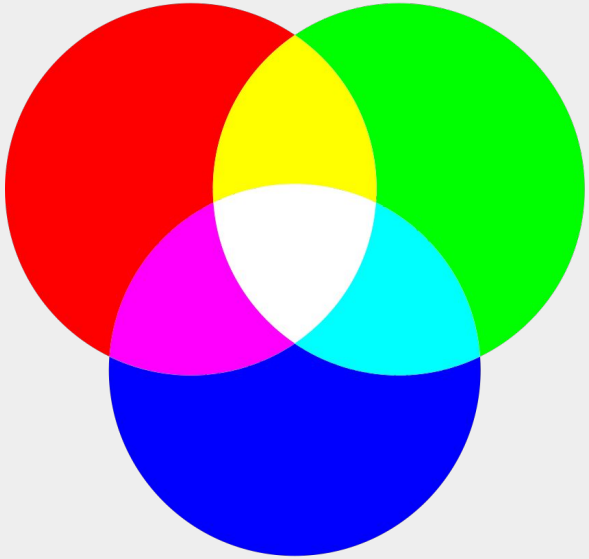
These are the same threats to tradition that we've already seen in this course:
what is knowledge?
Does God exist?
Are we free?
What is the source of morality?
And others to come...

Kant will ultimately attempt to argue that human understanding (i.e., the capacity to judge) is the source of the laws of nature and that human reason (i.e., the capacity to infer) is the source of moral law, which is the basis for our belief in God, freedom, and the immortality of the soul.

Kant's central thesis is that human beings experience only appearances, not things in themselves. It's even the case that space and time are forms of human intuition and not things-in-themselves.
He calls this thesis **transcendental idealism**.

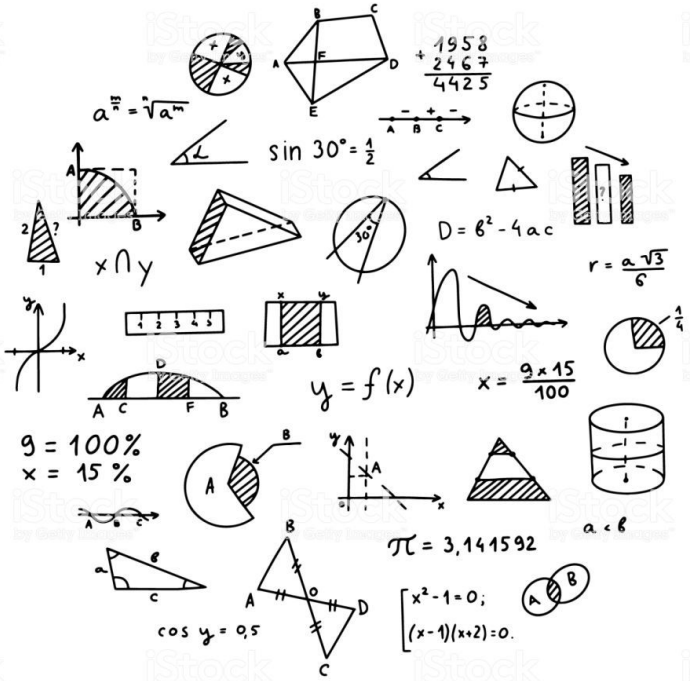


Integral to understanding Kant is understanding the analytic/synthetic distinction:
the predicates of analytic statements are somehow included in the subject.
For example, “All bachelors are male.”



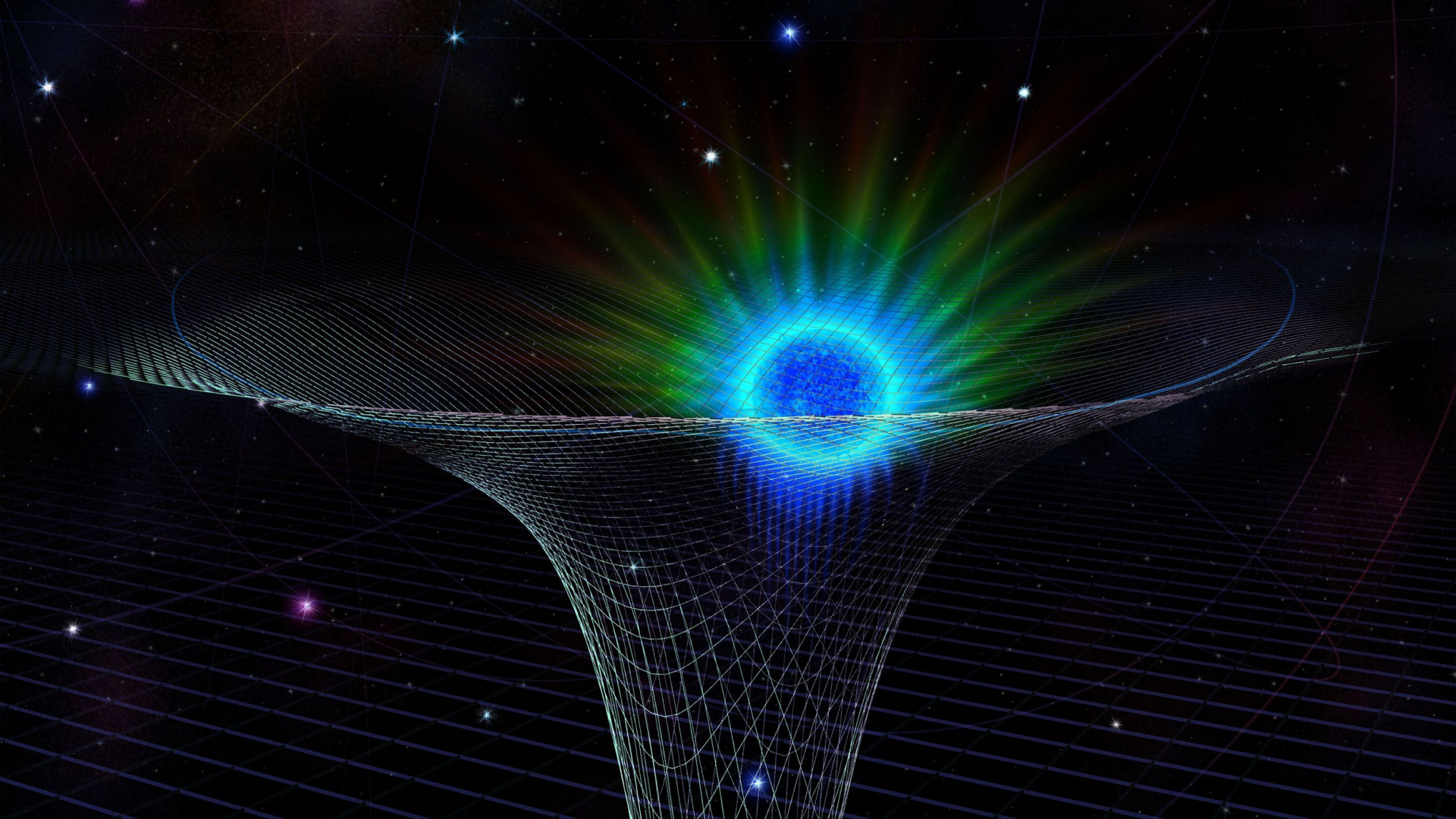
Synthetic statements somehow synthesize different concepts.
For example, “All bachelors are happy.” If one were to truly believe this statement, they have synthesized the concepts of **bachelorhood** and **happiness** in the minds.

Also important is the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* justification:
justifying a priori knowledge claims doesn't require (any particular) experience, for example "2 + 2 = 4" doesn't require some empirical observation to be justified. A posteriori statements do require some particular empirical justification.



Kant argued that we can make synthetic a priori judgments, i.e., judgments whose justification is independent of experience but that are objectively true about things-in-themselves.

One his principal examples is geometry.



“The informal feeling for what constitutes mathematical truth received a novel emphasis from the work of Immanuel Kant. He has to be to be regarded as believing that in geometry lay true knowledge of the world—knowledge *a priori* in that although some experience was required to obtain it, **it was independent of any particular experience**, and synthetic in that its truth was not a matter of logic alone (it could, in principle, be false). Among the synthetic a priori principles he accepted were geometric axioms (Gray 2003: 84; emphasis added).

Deontology is the view that an action being right or wrong depends on the principle (or intention) that motivated the action.

Consequentialism is the view that an act is right or wrong depending on the consequences of that action.

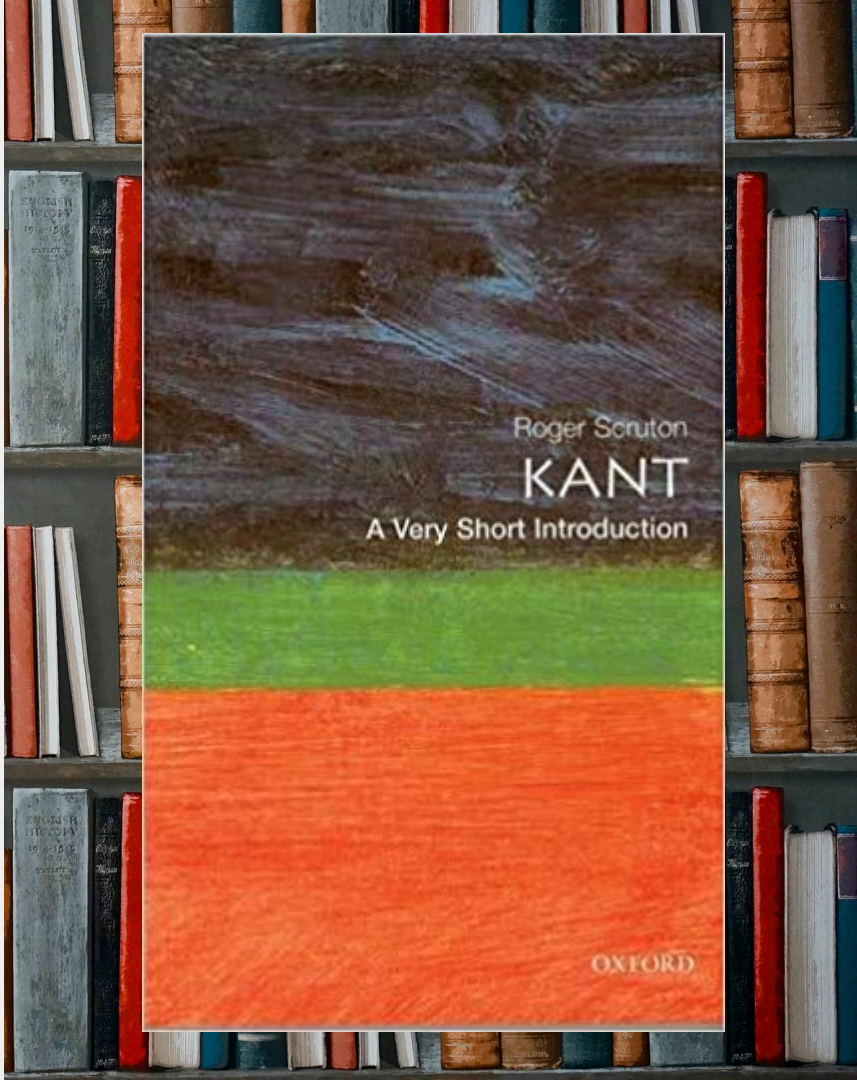
Kant is traditionally held as developing a robust, **very** complicated deontological system...

Technical note:
Kant builds his theoretical philosophy (metaphysics) and his practical philosophy (ethics) both on his transcendental idealism. For analysis, see Rohl 2020.

“The starting point of Kant’s ethics is the concept of freedom.

According to his famous maxim that ‘ought implies can’, the right action must always be possible: which is to say, I must always be free to perform it.

The moral agent ‘judges that he can do a certain things because he is conscious that he ought, and he recognises that he is free, a fact which, but for the moral law, he would have never known’”(Scruton 2001: 74).

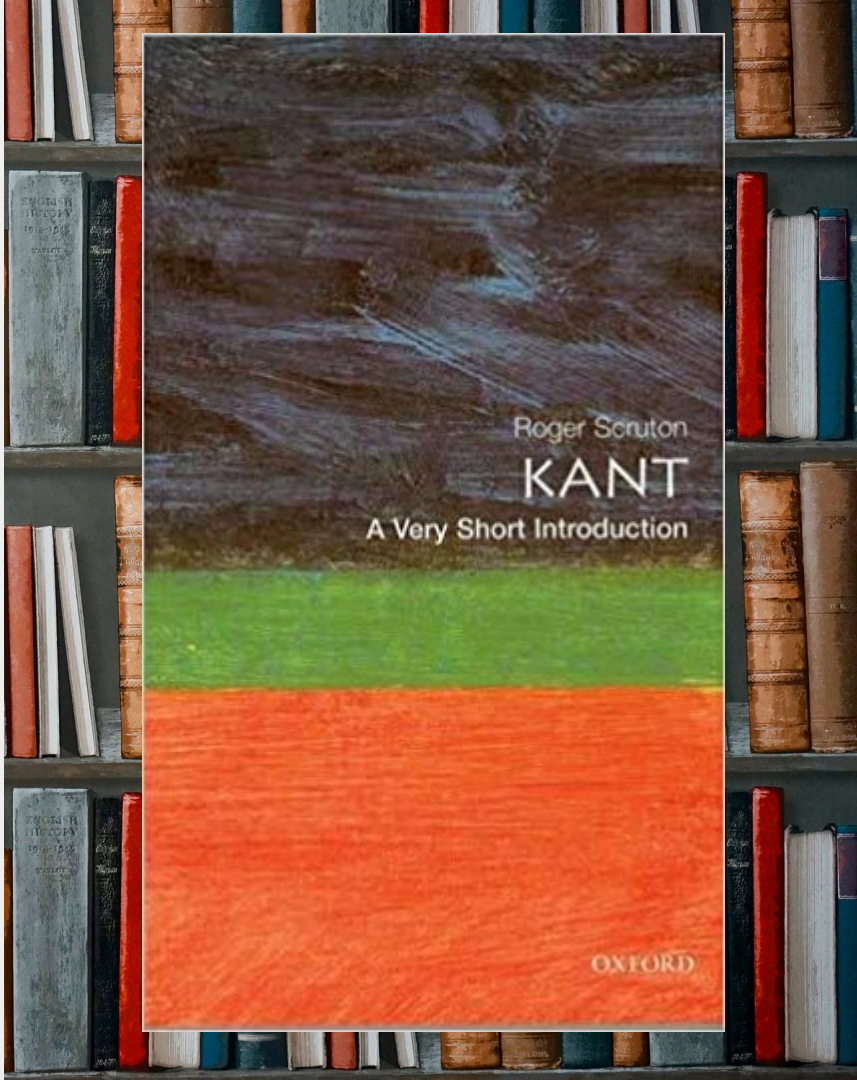


A Rational Being is a being that can live according to principles; moral personhood (i.e., the status of having moral rights) is only held by Rational Beings.

Kant argued that there are two distinct ‘realms’: the empirical realm (which is the world of phenomena that we perceive) and the transcendental realm (or the intelligible realm, the realm of things-in-themselves).

“The law of cause and effect operates only in the realm of nature (the empirical realm).

Freedom, however, belongs, not to nature, but precisely to that ‘intelligible’ or transcendental realm to which categories like causality do not apply”(Scruton 2001: 75).*

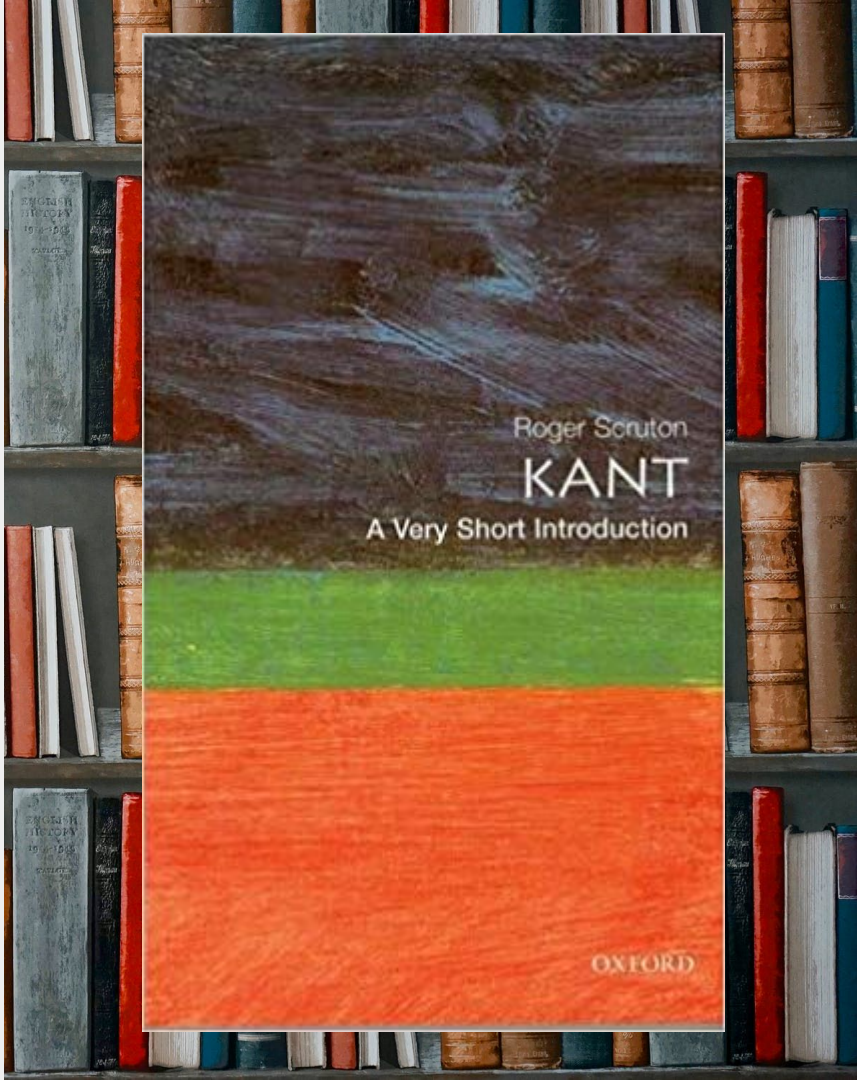


Because Kant's moral system is founded in the transcendental realm, he must rely solely on reason.

Kant argued that we can arrive at fundamental moral truths through Pure Reason; we do not need to look at the consequences of the action (in the empirical realm) to see whether they are right or wrong.

Question:
What is freedom?

“Freedom is the ability to be governed by reason”(Scruton 2001: 81).



How Reason Guides Us

A hypothetical imperative is the sort of imperative (or command) where:

a. you have a particular desired outcome or consequence, so
b. you do a particular action as a means to that end.

For example, “Billy wants to get an A in the course, so he does all the homework and engages in class.”

Also, “Wendy is thirsty, so she got up to get some water.”

A categorical imperative is a command from reason that applies across any situation no matter what you desire, i.e. it's a set of rules you must follow, since they always apply.

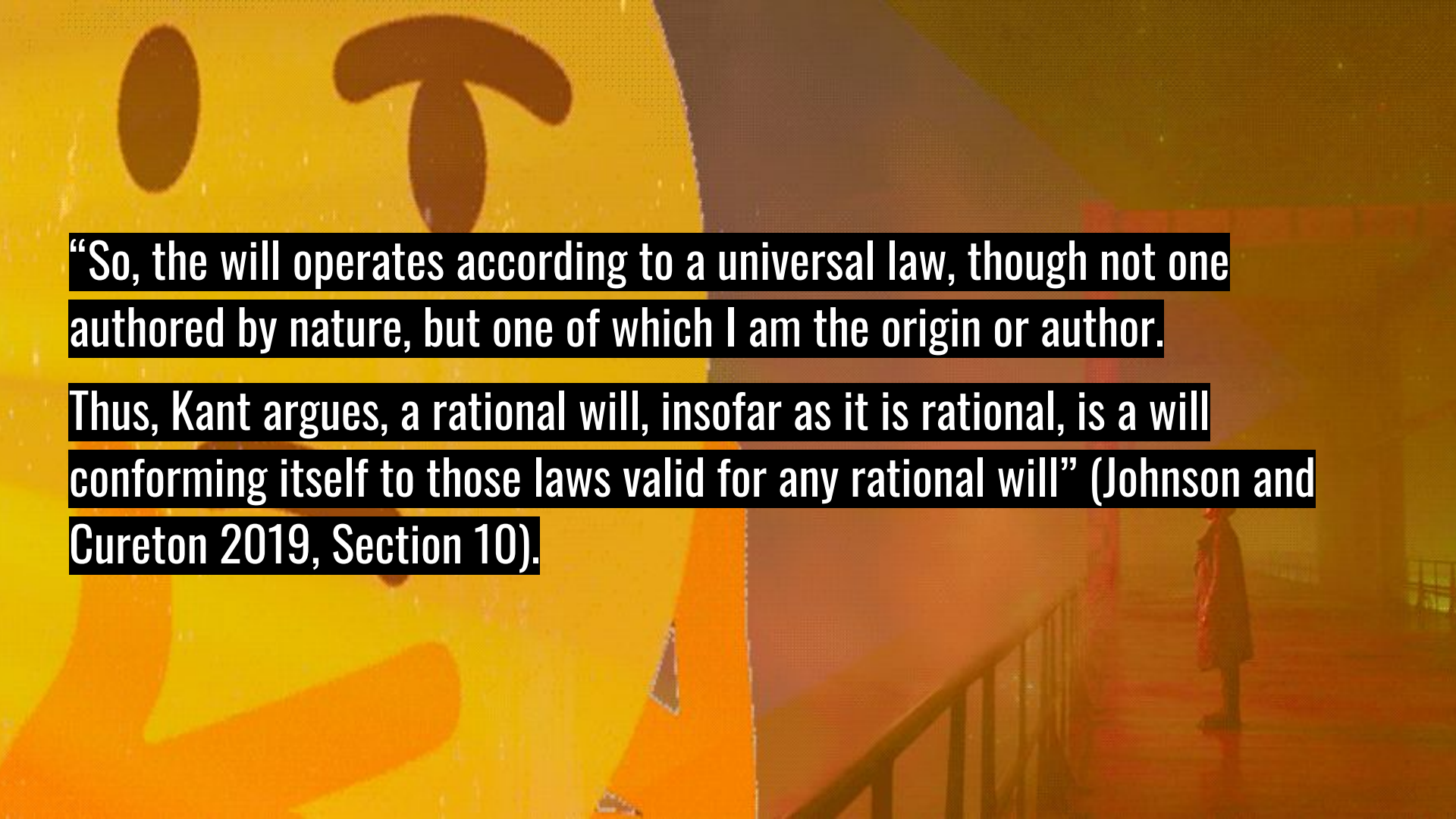
Kant believes that morality is a categorical imperative. It is a moral law that is commanded upon us by our own reason.

For Kant, an action only has real moral worth, i.e. moral value, if it is done out of duty.

Doing something out of duty is to do something **because** one is motivated out of respect for moral law, even if one doesn't really want to do it. The moral worth of the act is derived not from the consequences of the act, but from the principle, or maxim, that motivated that act.

“If *x* causes *y*, then there is some universally valid law connecting *X*s to *Y*s. So, if my will is the cause of my φing, then Φing is connected to the sort of willing I engage in by some universal law.

But it can’t be a natural law, such as a psychological, physical, chemical or biological law. These laws, which Kant thought were universal too, govern the movements of my body, the workings of my brain and nervous system and the operation of my environment and its effects on me as a material being. But they cannot be the laws governing the operation of my will; that, Kant already argued, is inconsistent with the freedom of my will in a negative sense…”



“So, the will operates according to a universal law, though not one authored by nature, but one of which I am the origin or author.

Thus, Kant argues, a rational will, insofar as it is rational, is a will conforming itself to those laws valid for any rational will” (Johnson and Cureton 2019, Section 10).

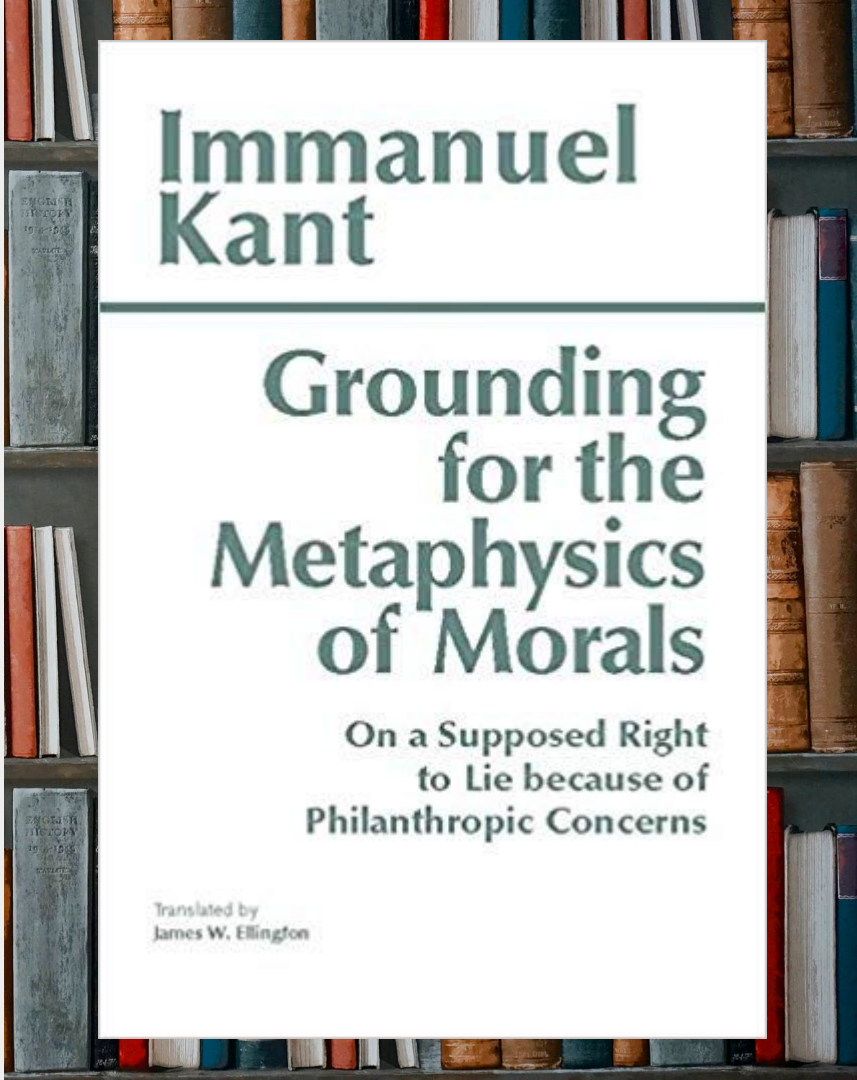
The Categorical Imperative

The Universal Law Formulation

Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

For Kant, to be immoral is to be irrational.

“Some actions are of such a nature that their maxim cannot even be thought as a universal law of nature without contradiction” (Groundwork 424:41-42)

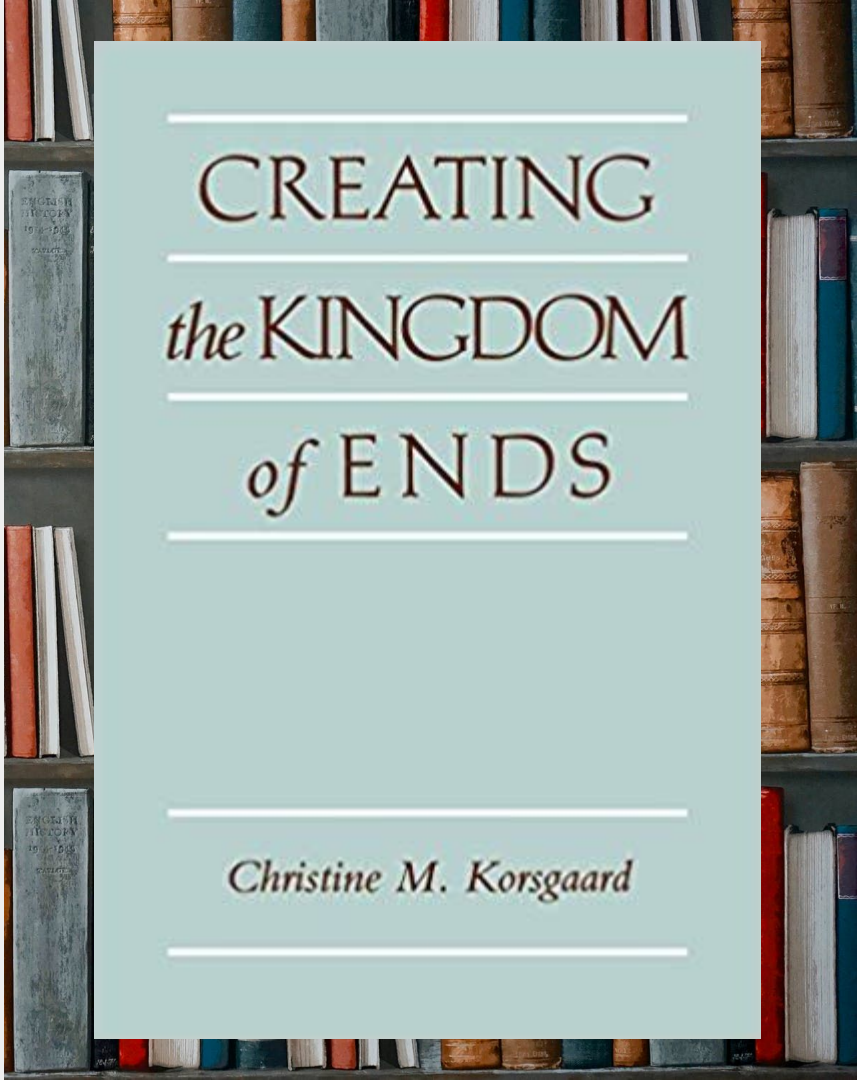


“The test is carried out by imagining, in effect, that the action you propose to perform in order to carry out your purpose is the standard procedure for carrying out that purpose.

What the test shows to be forbidden are just those actions whose efficacy in achieving their purposes depends upon their being exceptional.

If the action no longer works as a way of achieving the purpose in question when it is universalized, then it is an action of this kind.

Intuitively speaking, the test reveals unfairness, deception, and cheating” (Korsgaard 1996: 92).



How to Use the Universal Law Formulation:

Step 1: Consider an action.

Step 2: Consider what principle motivated that action.

Step 3: Ask yourself– Would willing that everyone act upon this principle make it so that I would no longer be able to engage in the action?

If yes, the action is morally right; if no, the action is wrong.

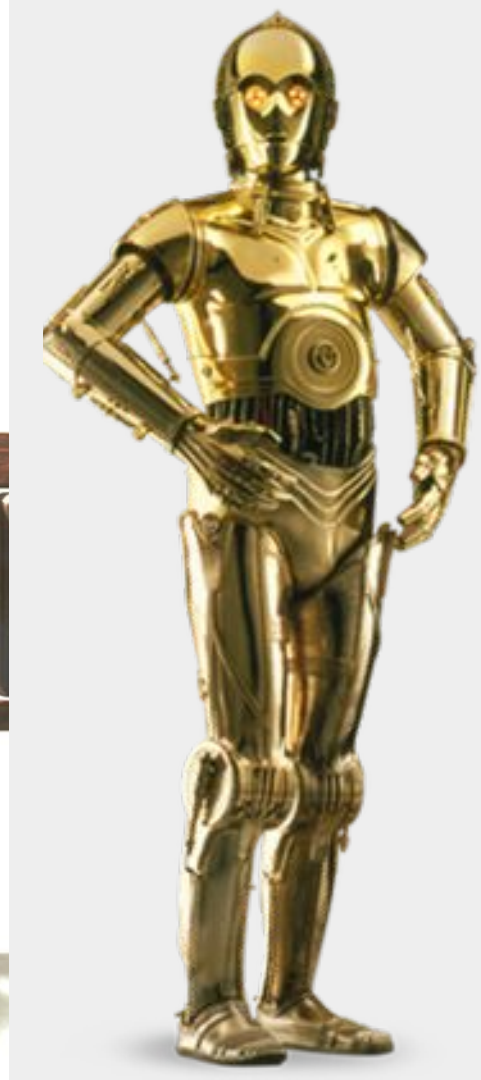
FLAVOR

Complete the following

Morally Right	Morally Wrong
	Lying
	Stealing

Complete the following

Morally Permissible	Morally Wrong
Honesty	Lying
Charity	Stealing
Protect Life	Murder
Self-defense	Assault
Developing Your Talents	Drug Abuse



Famous Kantians?

Note:

We have a perfect duty to not act according to maxims which are self-contradictory, e.g. stealing.

We also have imperfect duties which are *supererogatory*, i.e., you do not receive moral blame if you don't complete them, but you will get moral praise if you do, e.g., developing your talents.

The Humanity Formulation

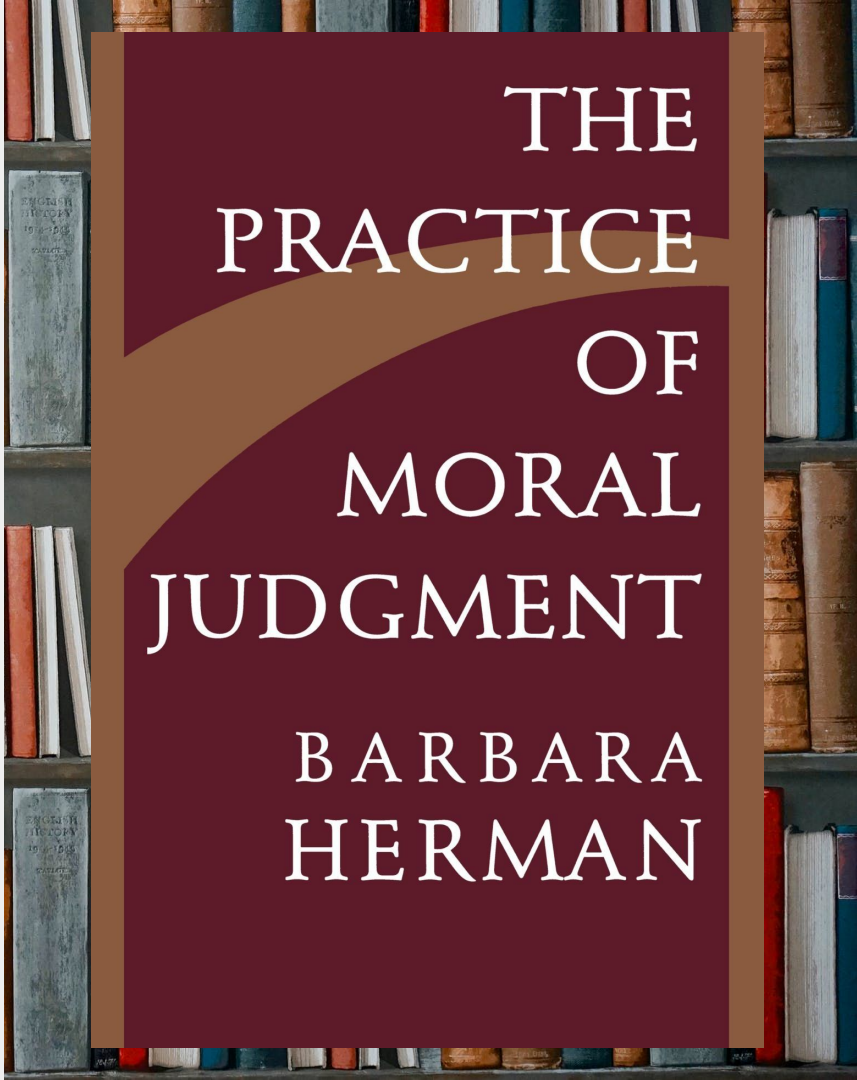
Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.

Complete the following

Morally Permissible	Morally Wrong
Honesty	Lying
Charity	Stealing
Protect Life	Murder
Self-defense	Assault
Developing Your Talents	Drug Abuse

This characterization of Kantian ethics, although mainstream, does have some critics.

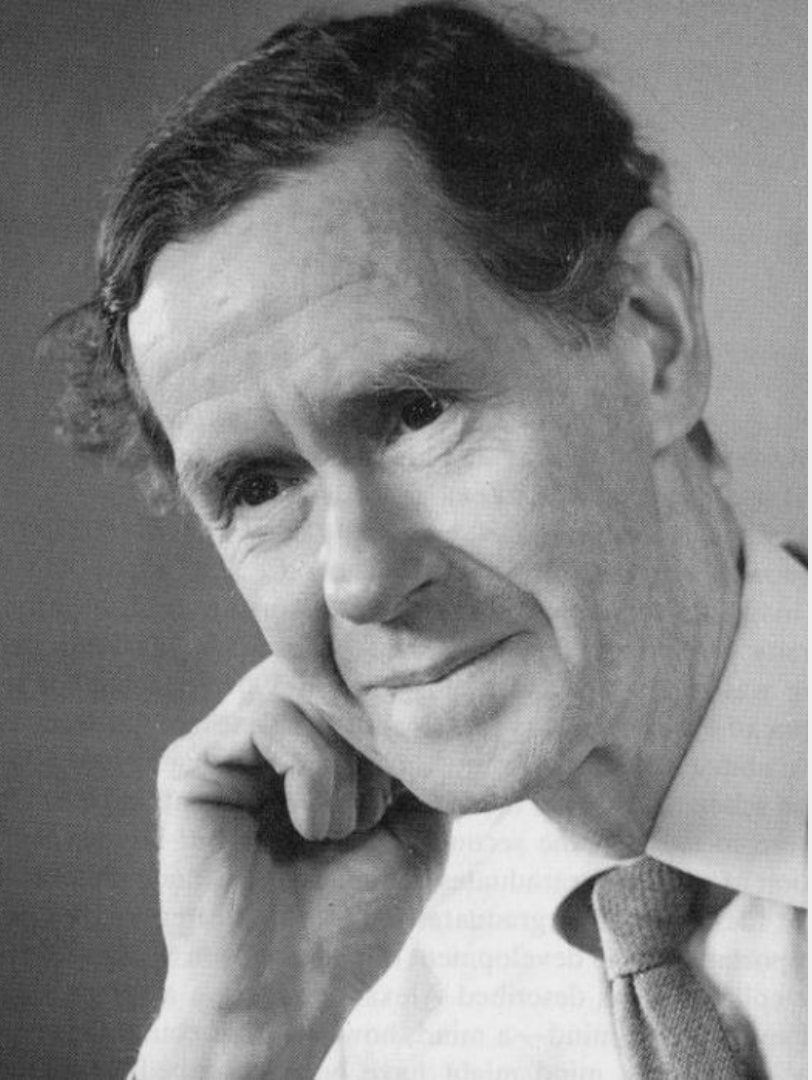
For example, Barbara Herman warns that Kant's views are too often characterized as "rule-fetishism," and that we should instead focus on how "moral rules give shape to the agent's desire to be a moral person" (Herman 1993: 27).



Problems with Kantian Ethics

Since Kant developed his ethical system in the 18th century and tried his best to ground it in a transcendental reality, advances in mathematics (non-Euclidean geometry) and physics (relativity) yield various empirical problems for his view.

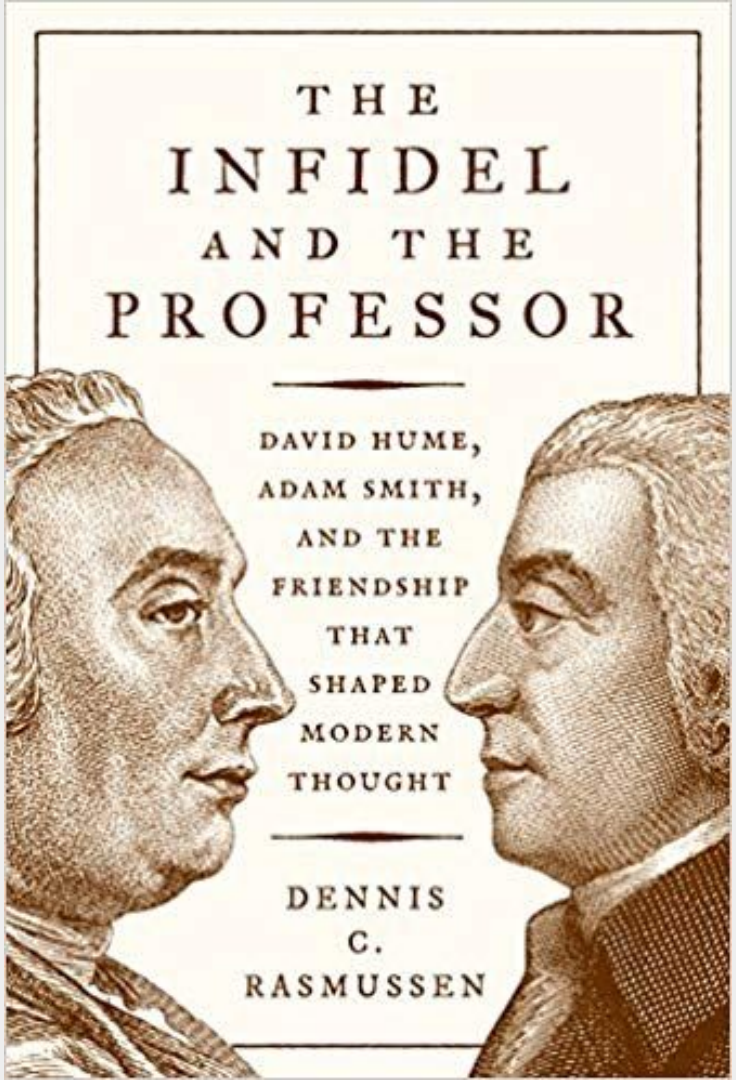
These problems are banished to [Appendix A](#).



Nonetheless, even for moral anti-realists, like John Mackie (pictured left), there is something intuitively true about the conjecture that moral maxims are supposed to be universalizable and accessible to everyone (via reason or some other faculty).

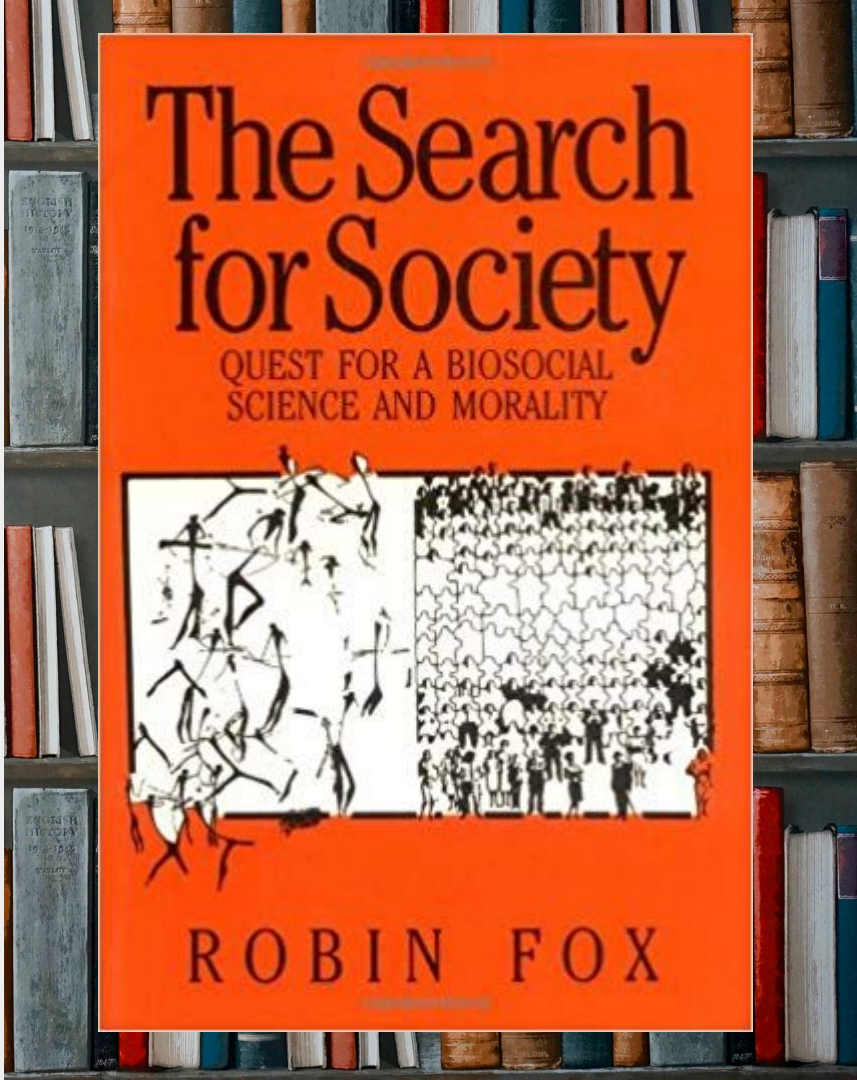
Stay tuned.

Some scholars claim that Kant is too reliant on reason...



Around the same time as Kant's writing, there was a strong tradition of "sentimentalist philosophers" who built their moral theories based on moral **emotions**.

Anthropologist Robin Fox claims that academia is currently still being harmed by a quasi-divinical treatment (i.e., worship) of reason that began in the Enlightenment.



“The previous paragraphs are taken, in fact, from a previous book.

There also I said that any of these diatribes are only contribution to a larger project, the aim of which is to free us from the intellectual shackles of the Enlightenment faith in reason, the romantic passion for the individual, and the nineteenth-century worship of progress.

But it is worth saying over and over again because no one gets it the first time” (Fox 1989, 233-4).

But even if we can resolve all these issues, there's still the fact that...

Kantian ethics appear to be:

- Too strict

E.g., lying

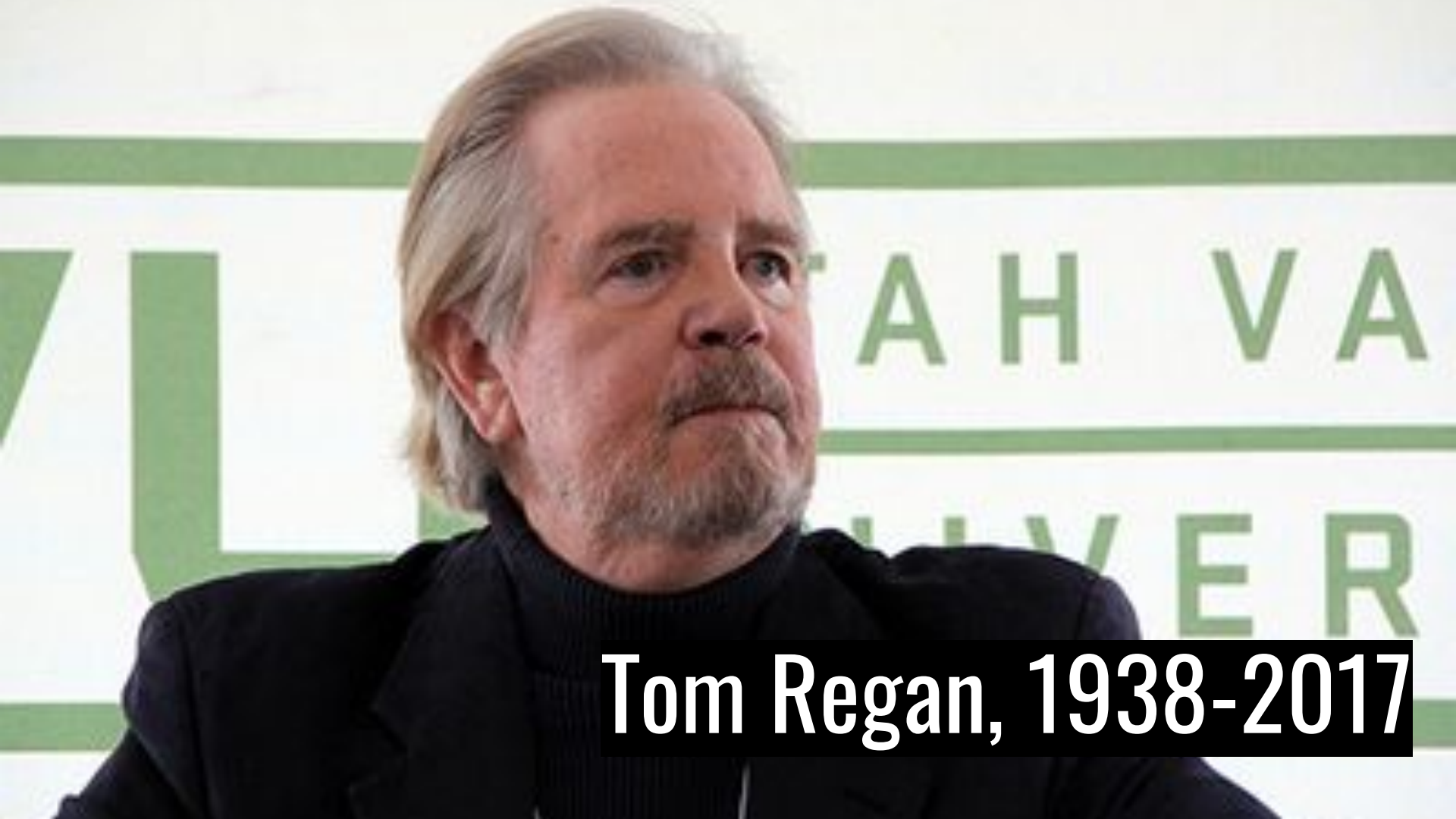
But even if we can resolve all these issues, there's still the fact that...

Kantian ethics appear to be:

- Too strict
- Too vague when duties conflict

E.g., lying to save a life

A modified Kantian ethic?


Tom Regan, 1938-2017

What we want from an ethical theory:

- ❏ Fit in with our moral intuitions
- ❏ Reflect how we actually form our moral judgments
- ❏ Resolve our moral debates
- ❏ Solve the puzzle of human collective action