

## UNIVERSAL MORAL LAW IN KANT'S PHILOSOPHY: MEANING AND APPLICATION IN THE MODERN WORLD

[A LEI MORAL UNIVERSAL NA FILOSOFIA DE KANT: SIGNIFICADO E APLICAÇÃO NO MUNDO MODERNO]

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**Abstract:** Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, with the central concept of "Categorical Imperative", laid the foundation for a moral system based on reason and universality. This study explores the profound meaning of universal moral law in Kant's thought, emphasizing its role as an immutable principle that guides human behavior beyond personal gain or specific circumstances. The absolute imperative requires that every action be taken in such a way that the principle behind it can become a universal law, while respecting the human being as an end in itself and not as a means. The article analyzes how Kant constructs this concept from pure reason, sees it as the highest expression of autonomous will, and evaluates its significance in shaping moral norms. In the context of the modern world, the study examines the application of absolute imperatives to issues such as digital technology, social inequality, and environmental crises, where moral values are often challenged by economic interests and individualism. The results show that the Kant philosophy provides a coherent ethical framework to face these challenges, encouraging global responsibility and respect for human dignity. However, its rigidity also raises questions about its ability to adapt in complex situations. The article concludes that Kant's universal moral law still holds great value, providing a rational foundation for guiding ethical behavior in contemporary society, including Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Kant; absolute imperative; universal moral law; reason; autonomous will; modern ethics; human dignity; Vietnam

**Resumo:** A filosofia moral de Immanuel Kant, tendo como conceito central o "Imperativo

Categorico", estabeleceu as bases para um sistema moral fundamentado na razão e na universalidade. Este estudo explora o significado profundo da lei moral universal no pensamento kantiano, enfatizando seu papel como um princípio imutável que orienta o comportamento humano para além de ganhos pessoais ou circunstâncias específicas. O imperativo absoluto exige que cada ação seja realizada de tal modo que o princípio subjacente a ela possa tornar-se uma lei universal, respeitando, ao mesmo tempo, o ser humano como um fim em si mesmo e não como um meio. O artigo analisa como Kant constrói esse conceito a partir da razão pura, concebendo-o como a expressão máxima da vontade autônoma, e avalia sua importância na configuração de normas morais. No contexto do mundo moderno, o estudo examina a aplicação de imperativos absolutos a questões como tecnologia digital, desigualdade social e crises ambientais, cenários em que valores morais são frequentemente desafiados por interesses econômicos e pelo individualismo. Os resultados demonstram que a filosofia kantiana oferece uma estrutura ética coerente para enfrentar esses desafios, incentivando a responsabilidade global e o respeito pela dignidade humana. Contudo, sua rigidez também suscita questionamentos quanto à sua capacidade de adaptação a situações complexas. O artigo conclui que a lei moral universal de Kant mantém grande valor, fornecendo um fundamento racional para orientar o comportamento ético na sociedade contemporânea, inclusive no Vietnã.

**Palavras-chave:** Kant; imperativo absoluto; lei moral universal; razão; vontade autônoma; ética moderna; dignidade humana; Vietnã

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most influential figures in modern philosophy, Immanuel Kant proposed a moral structure rooted in “Categorical Imperative”, which established him as a deep thinker of the 18th century (Heubel, & Biller-Andorno, 2005). In contrast to prior moral systems grounded on emotions, customs, or outcomes, Kant set out a fresh model whereby unblemished logic acted as the reasoning for every moral decision. Kant stated that morality is detached from any individual’s choices or specific contexts. Rather, it is a law applicable to every living being, undifferentiated by time or space (Höffe, 1994; Wood, 1999). An absolute imperative must be obeyed at all costs; it denotes the self-determining freedom individuals can achieve when forced to act on principles that merit universal law. This rational approach redefines the relationship between human freedom and normative obligations, establishing duty as the sole vector of moral worth (Guyer, 2000; McCarty, 2009)

In the modern world, where moral values are constantly challenged by technological developments, consumerism, and conflicts of interest, Kant’s thought offers a unique perspective on how to evaluate and guide human behavior. Digital technology, with the proliferation of social media and artificial intelligence, raises questions about privacy and ethical responsibility in the use of data. Growing social inequality requires an ethical framework to address justice and human dignity. The environmental crisis, with the overexploitation of resources, forces humanity to consider its responsibilities to future generations. In this context, Kant’s absolute imperative provides an immutable principle for shaping moral behavior, overcoming the temptations of short-term gain and selfishness. This study aims to explore the meaning of universal moral law in Kant’s philosophy, analyze how it is constructed from reason and autonomous will, and evaluate its applicability to modern ethical challenges. The article not only stops at recreating Kant’s thought, but also examines its practicality in solving today’s complex problems. The goal is to clarify the timeless value of absolute imperative, while also discussing the potential limitations of applying it in practice. Thereby, the study affirms that Kant’s philosophy is not just an abstract theory but a powerful tool for guiding moral behavior in a volatile world.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method, focusing on the analysis of the concept of “absolute imperative” in Kant’s moral philosophy. The main method consisted of examining his system of thought, especially how he formulated universal moral laws from pure reason and autonomous will. Rather than collecting new empirical data, research is based on synthesizing and interpreting Kant’s core ideas, placing them in relation to modern ethical issues. The analysis is done through a historical and comparative lens. First of all, Kant’s thought is placed in the context of 18th-century philosophy, a period in which reason became central to Western thinking, in order to understand the origin and original meaning of

absolute imperative. The study then compares the concept with contemporary ethical challenges, including technology, society, and the environment, in order to evaluate its applicability. This approach allows for the exploration of the connection between classical theory and modern practice, highlighting the sustainability of Kant's philosophy. In addition, the study applies conceptual analysis to clarify the elements that make up absolute imperatives-universality, autonomous will, and human dignity-and how they shape moral behavior. Topics such as freedom, duty, and responsibility are scrutinized to understand how Kant built a moral system independent of personal emotions or interests. To evaluate its application in today's world, the study uses a case discussion method, applying absolute imperatives to real-world issues such as digital privacy, social justice, and environmental protection. This method ensures a balance between theory and practice, providing insight into the value and limitations of Kant's philosophy in the modern context.

### **3. RESEARCH RESULTS**

Modern philosophy began and ended with Immanuel Kant, marking the transition from the Early Modern era (1600 -1800) to a new period. With the publication of the Critique of Pure Reason in 1781, Kant not only closed this period but also opened a new direction for Western philosophy. His thoughts spread across continents, deeply influencing epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics, shaping human civilization. Today, Kant's works are widely studied, from Europe to Asia, and in 2004, the 200th anniversary of his death, were celebrated in many countries such as Australia, Canada, China, Japan, and Vietnam, demonstrating his global stature.

Kant is a representative figure of the Enlightenment, an era that exalted reason and science. His practical ideas, such as the "Categorical Imperative" in ethics, laid the foundations for important modern texts such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Criminal Court (2002) (Kant, 1785, 1788). In the natural sciences and metaphysics, Kant made some remarkable contributions early in his career (1747-1770). His natural philosophy, which included pioneering insights into physical geography and meteorology, is widely celebrated for introducing an evolutionary cosmology, the nebular hypothesis, which stands as one of the earliest scientific models of the universe's origin (Kant, 1755). Modern scholars have even noted that his dynamic conception of matter bears striking similarities to contemporary developments in physics, such as superstring theory, establishing Kant as a vital bridge between philosophy and science (Westphal, 2004).

In religion, Kant's perspective underwent a significant shift. He appeared to transition from traditional Christian orthodoxy toward a form of skepticism, leveraging rational naturalism and deism (Kant, 1793). To avoid state persecution and royal Prussian censorship, Kant strategically framed his complex religious and philosophical ideas under strict academic wraps, allowing him to examine the limits of faith within the boundaries of mere reason.

Kant's moral philosophy revolves around the concept of the "Categorical Imperative", a central principle that shapes human behavior based on pure reason (Ogar & Bassey, 2023). For Kant, morality does not come from emotions, traditions, or consequences, but from a universal law derived from human autonomy. The Categorical Imperative is expressed by him in many forms, but the two most prominent expressions are: to act only according to the principle that you may want it to be a universal law for everyone, and to treat man as an end in itself, never just a means (Kant, 1785). These principles are not only codes of conduct but also expressions of freedom and human dignity.

Kant viewed reason as the highest characteristic of human beings, distinguishing them from other living beings (Walsh, 1981). He argues that an action has moral value not because it brings benefit or pleasure, but because it comes from reason, expressed in autonomous will—the ability to set laws for oneself without being governed by external desires or circumstances. Categorical Imperative, therefore, are an immutable requirement, independent of personal goals or specific conditions, in stark contrast to "hypothetical imperatives" that apply only when a person wants to achieve a certain outcome. For example, if someone helps someone else to be praised, that action has no real moral value, as it is based on extrinsic motives rather than pure reason.

The principle of universalization is the foundation of absolute imperatives. Kant argued that an action has moral value only if the principle behind it can be applied to people without leading to contradiction or irrationality. For instance, if a person is going to lie to avoid trouble, they must wonder if lying can become a common law that everyone follows. If that happens, trust between people will collapse, and the very act of lying will be ineffective—an internal contradiction that proves that lying cannot be a moral principle (O'Neill, 1989). Similarly, the principle of treating human beings as an end in itself emphasizes the inherent dignity of each individual, requiring absolute respect regardless of interests or circumstances (Korsgaard, 1996). Through this transcendental framework, it is established that moral duties possess an objective reality that cannot be undermined by subjective relativism (Westphal, 2004).

Autonomous will is at the core of Kant's philosophy, because it represents true human freedom. Unlike freedom in the conventional sense—doing what one wants—Kant's freedom is the ability to act rationally, above desire or external pressure. An autonomous person is not governed by emotions or personal interests, but sets laws for himself based on universal reason (Cohen, 2008). As a constructivist moral ideal, this concept directly shapes modern egalitarian principles of justice and social cooperation (Rawls, 2000). This creates a moral system independent of circumstances, where duty becomes the only motivation for right action (Kant, 1788). Kant believed that only when people act for duty, not for any other motive, do their actions have real moral value. The absolute imperative also emphasizes moral responsibility that goes beyond personal gain. For Kant, each person is not only responsible for his or her actions, but also contributes to shaping the general norms of society. Acting on absolute orders is not just a personal matter but participation in an ideal moral order where everyone is treated fairly and with respect. This creates a global ethical concept,

not limited by culture, time, or circumstances.

In the present sense, Kant's categorical imperative offers an approach to resolving difficult ethical dilemmas (Capps, 2001). In the case of the IT industry, the issue lies on how to utilize personal information on social media without infringing on one's privacy. In Kantian terms, if companies in the industry misuse data without user consent, they are breaching the fundamental principle of "self-defeating dystopia" where individuals become commodities for profit-making purposes. With regard to social disparity, the overriding imperative also demands that policies be implemented through principles that can be justifiably accepted by everyone, regardless of any particular self-serving agenda. For environmental issues, Kant would likely argue that resource depletion is unethical because it cannot be universalized without being detrimental to future generations (Choy, 2018).

Nonetheless, the absoluteness of these commands also presents a problem. Kant required that an action comply with a certain universal law irrespective of an outcome, which at times works against real life where certain particulars necessitate bending the rules. For instance, to intuitively claim that lying to save a life is permissible seems reasonable, but goes against Kant's principle of universality. For him, the justification of a moral system rests neither on the result but the reason and intention behind it, thus making sure his ethical framework remains intact.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

Kant's universal moral law, through absolute imperative, offers a unique approach to shaping ethical behavior in the modern world. His emphasis on reason and autonomous will puts this philosophy in a different position than moral views based on emotions, tradition, or consequences. In the context of digital technology, absolute imperatives provide a clear principle for evaluating issues such as privacy and ethical responsibility. For example, when companies collect user data without transparent consent, they not only violate individual rights, but also go against the principle of respecting human beings as their own ends. Kant will require that all actions in this area be based on a universally applicable principle—for example, data collection only when all parties agree and are treated fairly—ensuring transparency and respect for dignity (Ebels-Duggan, 2012).

Social inequality is another area in which Kant's thought can shine. In the modern world, the growing disparity between rich and poor raises questions about the justice and moral responsibility of individuals and governments alike. The absolute imperative requires that social policies be built on principles that can be applied to all without leading to conflict. For example, if a tax system favors the rich, it cannot become universal law because it will create systemic injustice, which contradicts fair reason. Kant would argue that each person, from the leader to the citizen, has a duty to act in such a way as to respect the dignity of all, not to turn anyone into an instrument to serve the interests of a small group (Lerussi, 2018).

The environmental crisis is a global challenge that absolute imperatives can also solve. Overexploitation of resources and pollution are now often justified by short-term economic benefits, but Kant would question whether these actions can become universal laws without causing harm. If everyone exploits the environment without caring about the consequences, the ecosystem will collapse—an outcome that contradicts reason, because it destroys the very conditions of human life. The imperative absolutely encourages a global moral responsibility, requiring people to act in such a way as to protect the environment not only for the present but also for future generations, seeing them as self-ends worthy of respect.

However, the rigidity of absolute orders sets limitations when applied in practice. Kant asserts that moral action must be based on duty and reason, independent of consequences, but this can lead to awkward situations. For example, in a conflict, lying to protect the life of an innocent person may be considered a violation of a universal principle, even if it is intuitively assumed that it is the right thing to do. Kant would argue that consequence does not determine moral value, but that intention and compliance with reason are the decisive factors. This makes his philosophy idealistic, sometimes difficult to adapt to complex situations that require a balance between conflicting values.

Compared to other moral systems, Kant's philosophy stands out for its universality and rationality. Unlike virtue, which focuses on personality and morality, Kant puts duty first, requiring people to act according to immutable principles rather than developing personal qualities. While utilitarianism evaluates action based on the greatest good for the majority, Kant emphasizes moral intent rather than outcome, creating a stark contrast. Existentialism, with absolute individual freedom, differs in that it does not bind action to universal laws but allows people to define their own values. In the modern world, Kant's approach may complement these views—for example, combined with the public interest to balance duty and consequence in environmental policies—but it retains its own strength thanks to its consistency and globality.

Kant's moral philosophy, with the concept of "absolute imperative" at its center, is not only an abstract theory from the 18th century but also offers profound practical value in the face of the moral challenges of the modern world. In an era dominated by technological leaps and bounds, rising social inequality, and worsening environmental crises, Kant's universal moral law provides a rigorous theoretical framework for guiding human behavior. The absolute imperative requires that each action be based on principles that can be applied to everyone without causing conflict, and at the same time respect the human person as an end in itself and not a means. This approach is not only ideal, but can also be applied to solve real-world problems, from the use of digital technology to global responsibility for the planet.

One of the hallmarks of today's world is the explosion of digital technology, especially social networks, artificial intelligence, and big data platforms. These advances have enormous benefits, but they also raise ethical questions about privacy, information manipulation, and the responsibility of technology corporations. In Kant's view, absolute imperatives can be used to assess the ethics

of the collection and use of personal data. If a company exploits user information without explicit consent, it violates the principle of treating people as an end in itself, turning them into tools to maximize profits. Moreover, if this behavior is universalized—that is, every company is free to exploit data without permission—it will lead to the collapse of trust in the digital society, an outcome that contradicts reason. Kant will require that technology platforms operate on the principle of transparency and respect for user autonomy, ensuring that data is only used when it is in accordance with a common law that is acceptable to all.

Social inequality is another issue that Kant's absolute imperative can illuminate. In the 21st century, the gap between rich and poor is widening, from income disparities within countries to resource imbalances between regions of the world. Economic and social policies are often dominated by the interests of a small group, ignoring the dignity of the marginalized. Kant would argue that a genuine moral system must be based on universally applicable principles that do not lead to injustice. For example, if raising taxes for the rich to support the poor cannot become universal law because it causes a conflict in ownership, then conversely, maintaining privileges for the elite cannot be justified if it damages the dignity of the majority. The imperative absolutely encourages leaders and individuals to act in such a way that all policies respect the intrinsic value of each person, not turning anyone into a vehicle for the benefit of others. In Vietnam, where the disparity between urban and rural areas still exists, Kant's thought can inspire equitable development policies that ensure everyone is treated as subjects with their own values. The environmental crisis is another global challenge that absolute imperative can direct. Overexploitation of resources, from deforestation to greenhouse gas emissions, is often justified by immediate economic benefits, but Kant would question whether these actions can become universal laws without harm. If every country and individual exploits the environment without regard for the consequences, the ecosystem will collapse, depriving humanity of its very living conditions—an irrational and contradictory outcome of reason. The absolute imperative requires people to act with responsibility that goes beyond personal interests, considering future generations as well as their own ends that deserve respect. This could lead to policies to protect the environment, such as reducing fossil energy consumption or encouraging sustainable lifestyles, in line with the universal principle proposed by Kant. In the context of Vietnam, where pollution from industrialization is becoming more severe, Kant's philosophy can promote a public sense of environmental responsibility, encouraging both the government and the people to act for the common good.

In addition, absolute imperatives can also be applied to ethical issues related to artificial intelligence and automation. As AI increasingly replaces humans in many fields, the question of the ethical responsibility of developers and users of the technology becomes urgent (Johnson, 2015). Kant would demand that the development of AI be based on the principle of not turning humans into tools, ensuring that technology serves their dignity and freedom. For example, if an AI system is designed to manipulate user behavior through advertising, it will violate absolute imperatives because it does not respect their autonomous

will. Kant's philosophy suggests that developers should set ethical limits, only deploying technology in a way that everyone can agree on if it becomes the norm. In the medical field, absolute orders also bring practical value. Issues such as the allocation of medical resources during the pandemic or patient agency can be evaluated through the Kant lens. If a health system prioritizes the rich in access to vaccines, it cannot become universal law without causing injustice, violating Kant's principle of fairness. He would argue that each patient must be treated as a personal end, regardless of social or economic status, ensuring respect for their inherent dignity.

However, the application of absolute command to the modern world is not without its challenges. Its rigidity-which requires acting on duty regardless of the consequences-can lead to awkward situations. For example, in a crisis, lying to protect the innocent may be seen as a violation of universal principles, even if it has practical benefits. Kant would argue that moral values lie in intention and rational adherence, not results, but this is sometimes difficult to convince in practice, where consequences play an important role. In Vietnam, a culture heavy on sentiment and community may conflict with Kant's cold reasoning, which requires adjustment to match local values. The power of absolute imperative, however, lies in its ability to direct behavior beyond personal self-interest, encouraging a global moral responsibility. In an increasingly polarized world, Kant's philosophy is a reminder that morality is not a compromise but a commitment to noble principles, offering hope for a more just and humane society. Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, with the "absolute imperative" as the center, is not only a philosophical theory but also brings practical value to guide the legal profession in Vietnam in the modern context. The Rule of Law here is understood as legal justice-fairness, transparency in law enforcement, protection of human rights, and promotion of a harmonious society. Kant's absolute imperative requires acting according to principles that can become universal laws and respecting the human person as an end in itself, not just a means (Kant, 1797). In the context of Vietnam, where the legal system is constantly improving to meet the needs of economic development, environmental protection, and improving the quality of life, Kant's thought provides a rigorous theoretical framework to strengthen legal justice, towards a more ethical and sustainable society. One area where Kant's absolute mandate can make a positive contribution is human rights, a focus in the development of law in Vietnam. The Vietnamese state has been making efforts to protect basic rights such as education, health, and personal freedom, in line with the trend of globalization and international integration. In Kant's view, each individual must be treated as an end in itself, not turned into an instrument that serves the interests of any other party. This can be applied to increase transparency in legal processes, ensuring that all citizens-regardless of social status-enjoy equitable access to justice. For example, when considering policies to support education in remote areas, the imperative absolutely encourages the development of principles that can be applied to all, not just one group but ignores another, thereby strengthening the spirit of equality in Vietnamese law.

Environmental protection is another important area in which Kant's ideas can guide the legal profession in Vietnam. With rapid economic development, Vietnam is facing the need to balance growth and conservation of natural resources. The absolute mandate requires that legal actions related to the environment must be based on principles that can become general law without contradiction or harm. For example, when enacting regulations on industrial waste management, Kant would suggest that legislation should be developed so that every business can comply without degrading the quality of the living environment—a universal standard that protects both now and in the future. Moreover, the principle of respecting human beings as an end in itself can be extended to include responsibility to future generations, seeing them as subjects who deserve a healthy planet. This is in line with legal initiatives in Vietnam to promote sustainable development, such as encouraging the use of renewable energy and protecting biodiversity. Sustainable development is another major goal of Vietnam, and the absolute imperative can serve as a moral guideline in this area. With the increase in population and economic demand, Vietnam is looking for a way to balance material progress with cultural and environmental protection. Kant would require that development policies be based on principles that not only serve the interests of the present, but can also be applied at all times without harm. For example, when building industrial parks, the law should ensure that all activities respect the people's right to live in a healthy environment, not turning them into a vehicle for short-term economic benefits. This is in line with Vietnam's efforts to enact environmental protection laws and encourage green lifestyles, reflecting Kant's sense of global responsibility.

However, the application of absolute orders to Vietnamese law is not without difficulties. Kant's rationality and rigidity—acting on duty regardless of the consequences—may conflict with Vietnamese cultural values, where sentimentality and flexibility are often valued. For example, in a family dispute, the application of the universal principle may not be appropriate if it is necessary to consider the intimate relationship between the parties. However, Kant would emphasize that moral values lie in intention and rational adherence, independent of specific circumstances, thereby encouraging a consistent approach in law enforcement. The positive side of absolute order is its ability to promote a fair and accountable legal system. In the context of Vietnam's international integration and economic development, Kant's thought can support the development of legal policies that respect human dignity, from the right to education, to health, to environmental protection. It encourages legislators and citizens to act with a sense of common duty, not only for personal gain but for a harmonious and sustainable society. The Kant philosophy, when adapted to Vietnamese culture, brings a moral vision to strengthen the rule of law, contributing to the comprehensive development of the country in the new era.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Kant's universal moral law, through absolute imperative, is a pillar in moral philosophy, providing a rational and immutable approach to guiding human behavior. By demanding action based on universal principles and respect for human dignity, Kant not only built a moral system independent of emotions or interests, but also created a vision of an ideal moral order. In the modern world, this philosophy provides a powerful theoretical framework for addressing issues ranging from digital technology, social inequality, to environmental crises, encouraging global responsibility and equity. While the rigidity of absolute command may limit its ability to adapt in complex situations, its core value lies in its emphasis on autonomous will and reason-factors that help people rise above desire and circumstance to act for duty. For Vietnam and the wider world, Kant's philosophy is a powerful call to build a moral society where each individual lives not only for himself or herself but also for the common good of humanity. It reminds us that ethics is not a compromise but a commitment to noble principles, offering hope for a more just and compassionate world.

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