



***KANT'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY:
AN UNORTHODOX ATTEMPT AT AN INTERPRETIVE
RADICAL RECONSTRUCTION:
AN INNER AND INVERTED REFORMULATION OF THE CATEGORICAL
IMPERATIVE, THE RIGHT TO LIE AGAINST EVIL, AND THE MORAL
RIGHT TO REVOLUTION***

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This work is an audacious and pioneering project that attempts a radical reconstruction of Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative by subverting or reversing the traditional order of the formulations to make them more practical and conducive to the demands of contemporary times. This paper will also discuss the twin controversial issues in Kant's moral and political philosophy, namely the right to lie and the right to revolution by the people. This paper will argue that Kant is a revolutionary, albeit a reluctant one, but revolutionary still, nonetheless.

Keywords: Categorical Imperative, Freedom, Ethical Responsibility, Revolutionary Action, Humanity

Dates:

Submission: July 9, 2023

Revised: March 28, 2025

Accepted: August 8, 2025

Published(Online): Sept. 30, 2025

How to cite this article:

De Vega, J. M. (2025). Kant's Moral Philosophy: An Unorthodox Attempt at an Interpretive Radical Reconstruction: An Inner and Inverted Reformulation of the Categorical Imperative, the Right to Lie against Evil, and the Moral Right to Revolution. *Scientia - The International Journal on the Liberal Arts*, 14(2), 92-107. <https://doi.org/10.57106/scientia.v14i2.80>

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In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousand-fold in the future. When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers, we are simply protecting their trivial old age, we are thereby ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations.

--- Alexander I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

Professor Lewis W. Beck claimed that there are inconsistencies in Kantian ethics, and it is not “adequate to resolve the painful problems of conflicting duties.”¹

To date, based on my readings, none among Kant’s scholars, authorities, and commentators have endeavored or even tried to modify, reconstruct, and reinterpret Kant’s formulations of the Categorical Imperative.

This audacious pioneering work is an attempt towards that challenge and direction.

The aim of this paper is novel and ambitious. The central objective is nothing more than to read, reinterpret, and construe Kant’s moral philosophy **by reversing the order of the formulations of the Categorical Imperative**. In doing so, it will subject Kant’s moral philosophy to a reevaluation. The author hopes that this radical and revolutionary process will reveal to us the complete map and the holistic and clear picture of Kant’s moral philosophy, including his political views.

That is the key for us to see Kant’s philosophy as a Whole!

The author humbly believes that it is only in doing so that the apparent inconsistency, contradiction, ambiguity, and discrepancy in Kant’s thought can be settled and put to rest.

¹ Lewis W. Beck, “Kant and the Right of Revolution,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 32, No. 3 (July – Sept), 1971, University of Pennsylvania, page 422.

Further, it is also the belief of this writer that all those years Kant had left us a philosophical puzzle and the duty of the modern thinkers of Kant is to unravel, to solve, and decode, so to speak, the said mental test or moral riddle.

After my discussion of the proper reading and interpretation of the formulations of the Categorical Imperative, the second part of this paper shall discuss one of the perennial controversies about Kant, and that is his persistent and strict command not to lie even in the face of evil and danger.

In that section, I will argue that based on my different reading and interpretation of the formulations of the Categorical Imperative, in Kantian philosophy, a moral agent is not powerless in the face of evil and certain danger, whether in the life of an individual or another person.

We have the right to lie against evildoers, deceivers, and evil creatures to save a life and to preserve ourselves.

Finally, in the last portion of this paper, I shall discuss Kant’s paradoxical views on the right of the people to revolution.

On that particular section, I will argue that (again) based on my different, unorthodox and radical version of the formulations of the Categorical Imperative that the people does not only have the right to revolution, but following my expanded version of Kant’s moral philosophy, it is the ethical, moral and political duty of the people to do so, if the powers that be is already violating the original contract with them, abusing and debasing their rights, humanity and dignity and using the law to suppress the development of public reason and intellectual discourse which are necessary tools and indispensable elements





for us to create and forge a new and higher moral culture.

The Kantian right to revolution is based or grounded on the defense of Man's Humanity, dignity, and autonomy. To rebel is to defend reason, responsibility, and ultimately self-affirmation and freedom!

The traditional, usual, and historical formulation of the Categorical Imperative

The usual chronology used by various scholars and commentators of Kant in writing and discussing his formulations of the Categorical Imperative is always in this order:

Categorical Imperative I: Universalize your maxim

Categorical Imperative II: Treat persons as ends

Categorical Imperative III: Autonomy or legislative membership in a Kingdom of Ends

I categorically say that the said sequence makes no sense and is incontestably misplaced.

COMMENTARIES

In my view, this is not only false but an utterly grave error in reading and following Kant's moral philosophy. What we need is an inward, radical, and utterly different reading of the Formulations of the Categorical Imperative.

To start with, the moral law is NOT to forget that the very bloody source of the said law is us or man himself.

Man as the Starting Point and the Source of Everything

There is no point in talking about ethics and morality and philosophy in general if there is no man to begin with.

A Radical Inner Moral Reconstruction of the Categorical Imperative

Hence, in my utterly different view, no matter how unorthodox and controversial it is, the proper and the correct way of reading, interpreting, and carrying out the commands, dictates, formulations, and laws of the Categorical Imperative is --- **if we will begin with our very selves.**

Therefore, the precise and just order to follow is the inner, logical, and rational sequence in the personal or individual sense:

Categorical Imperative I: Autonomy or legislative membership in a Kingdom of Ends

Categorical Imperative II: Treat persons as ends

Categorical Imperative III: Universalize your maxim

I know that others may vehemently object to my contention, but let me explain.

Following my reading and interpretation of Kant himself, C1² persuades us to think for ourselves. That is *sapere aude*, dare to know. We must be bold, daring, and courageous enough to use the power of our own reason.

C2 persuade us to look, to search, to see, and to think for our fellows. To think for the others, to enter their bodies and souls, to touch each

² This, in my view, is in conformity with Kant's three (3) Rules that he laid down in his **Critique of Power of Judgement** (1790), namely: Think for yourself, think in the place of the other, and think objectively.





other's lives; to wear each other's shoes. To see things, ideas, and perspectives from the eyes of another! To treat everyone with love and respect, for Humanity!

While C3 is my view, it is the ultimate Universal Law, albeit it shall only happen and will have at least a chance to be in operation if and when we have already set into motion the application of C1 and C2. The foundation of the Categorical Imperative is based on C1 of my own formulation, which is Categorical Imperative I: Autonomy or legislative membership in a Kingdom of Ends.

For it is our rational autonomy and nothing else that justifies our ends and actions as moral beings,

Question:

Does the foregoing discussion and reinterpretation of the formulation of the Categorical Imperative create an exception to a moral agent that will lead to a contradiction?

Reply:

I do not think so! The exception is not embedded in the amended formulations themselves but in the character of the moral agent, the circumstances he or she is in, the condition of the times, and the specific situation subject of the experience as a whole.

Instead, far from creating a contradiction, the same will not only harmonize and further humanize the seeming strictness, rigidity and stern strenuousness of Kant's moral philosophy; but it will indubitably extend the reading and the vision of his moral thought making them more alive, accessible and relevant in light of what is happening now, in general to the world and specifically to the Philippines which is

undergoing another dark and utterly bloody period in its contemporary society and history.

In the stirring words of Professor Korsgaard:

"The only value there is, is that which human beings give to their own lives. We must be the source of value."³

Indeed, we are!

Our Right to Lie against Evil

I concur with Professor Christine M. Korsgaard that "the great difficulty with Kant's moral philosophy is that it seems to imply that our moral obligation leaves us powerless in the face of evil."

Indeed, this is Kant's well-known "rigorism"⁴

The usual example of this is Kant's view on our duty to tell the truth.

The two (2) famous usual passages in Kant's works can be found in the work, *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, and in an essay, "*On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives*."

Kant's stern position had divided his readers. Yet, in my view, both of them are wrong and completely mistaken.

Nonetheless, those readers, both the defenders and the critics, have only focused their attention,

attack, and/or defense on Kant's moral philosophy on the implication and/or application of the first formulation of the categorical imperative, the Formula of Universal Law (FUL).

³ Christine M. Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, page 246.

⁴ I personally call it as Kant's "rigidity", while Professor Korsgaard referred to it as Kant's "moral strenuousness."





Hence, it is both pertinent and relevant to ask, what will happen if, in analyzing and dissecting the situation, we shift or expand our vision, scope, and attention to the other formulations of the categorical imperative?

The Overemphasis on the First Formula of the Traditional Categorical Imperative

It is my firm view that the extreme reliance and overemphasis on the Formula of Universal Law of the categorical imperative is a negation and/or bastardization, nay a caricature of Kant's moral philosophy.

To quote lengthily and liberally, Professor Allen W. Wood on this crucially important matter:

“The overemphasis on FUL, both by Kant's critics and by his sympathizers, has had a mischievous effect on the interpretation, and therefore the reception, of Kantian ethics. On the one hand, it has misled many of Kant's sympathizers into thinking that what is distinctive and valuable about his ethical theory consists in some distinctive “decision procedure” rather than in its substantive conception of rational nature and autonomy as the real grounds of ethical value. Kant's own quite limited use of the universalizability tests (in his complex exposition of the moral principle in the *Groundwork*) is then ignored, and the tests are treated as if they were some sort of universal moral decision procedure or algorithm (a sort of Kantian response to the equally bogus act-utilitarian project of precisely calculating and comparing all the felicitic tendencies of all the practical options open to us in any situations). On the other hand, it has misled Kant's critics into thinking that when they find defects in Kant's first formula when it is regarded as a universal and self-sufficient moral decision procedure, they have discovered a good reason simply to dismiss Kant's ethics as a whole without further ado.”⁵

⁵ Allen W. Wood's “What is Kantian Ethics?” in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant edited by Allen W. Wood with contributions of J. B. Schneewind, Marcia Baron, Shelly Hagan and Allen W. Wood, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002, page 172.

Hence, I concur overwhelmingly to Professor Korsgaard's reminder that the *Groundwork* contains two (2) other sets of terms in which the categorical imperative is formulated, namely:

- b. The treatment of humanity as an end in itself (Law of Humanity or Formula of Humanity [FOH]); and,
- c. Autonomy or legislative membership on a Kingdom of Ends (FOA).

Kant's “strenuous moralism” takes “a hard line against lying.” To him, any lie --- “vitiates the very source of right... To be truthful (honest) on all declarations is, therefore, a sacred and unconditionally commanding law of reason that admits of no expediency whatsoever.”⁶

To Professor Michael J. Sandel, this “seems a strange and extreme position. Surely, we don't have a moral duty to tell a Nazi storm trooper that Anne Frank and her family are hiding in the attic. It would seem that Kant's insistence on telling the truth to the murderer at the door either misapplies the categorical imperative or proves its folly.”⁷

The same kind of feeling of unease and moral predicament can be detected in Professor A. C. Grayling when he wrote that:

“What troubles those like Plato who find lying unacceptable, no matter what the consequence is this: to tell a lie, you have to know the truth but deliberately intend to communicate its very opposite to your audience. (If you tell your audience something which is false but which you do not know is so, you are not lying.) You do commit a double crime of knowing but concealing the truth, a precious possession, and

⁶ Immanuel Kant. “On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns” (1799), translated by James W. Ellington and published as a supplement to Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Moral*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Hackett Publishing, 1993, page 64.

⁷ Michael J. Sandel “What Matters is the Motive/Immanuel Kant” in his book *Justice What's the Right Thing To Do?*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 2009, page 133.





of purposefully leading others away from it. **The hard justice of this view led later philosophers, notably Kant, to box clever in the way only philosophers know how.** Lying is always wholly unacceptable, he said, but it is alright sometimes to tell an untruth, which is a different and lesser thing, when lying outright is like poisoning someone, telling him an untruth is like attacking him in the street; those are Kant's own similes --- a more honest thing, so to say. It is accordingly acceptable to tell an untruth when it protects the other from injury, to his feelings, or otherwise. 'Am I ugly?' asks your neighbour, who makes Quasimodo look like a beauty queen. 'I wouldn't use the word "ugly": you reply; 'you have a distinctive face.'⁸

If the act of telling an untrue statement in order not to hurt the feelings of a neighbor is permissible in Kantian moral philosophy, can the same act be justified in saving the life of someone in danger?

Question:

Do we have the right to lie to resist evil?

Answer:

Based on my radical reconstruction of the Formulation of the Categorical Imperative, there is no iota of doubt whatsoever that the answer is --- absolutely yes.

CRITIQUE OF THE TRADITIONAL FORMULATION OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE:

To follow strictly the tenets of the categorical imperative and to carry it out rigidly to the letter, in my view, will lead to the moral agent's incapacity to promptly decide worst; it may also result in one's inability to take action on utterly pressing and important matters, especially

⁸ A. C. Grayling, *The Meaning of Things: Applying Philosophy to Life* on the discussion of Lying, Phoenix Paperback, London, reissued 2007, pages 46-47. Emphases are mine.

in cases of life and death situations and grave danger.

Further, I vehemently disagree that in the Kantian moral philosophy, it is only the good act that must be put into consideration. In my view, my act is good if the consequences of my actions are also just and appropriate --- as I originally intended.

How can I will something good and just if the result shall lead to injury, evil, and worst, injustice?

If I willed the means, it means that I also willed the ends⁹.

To quote Professor Paul Kurtz on this matter:

"Critics have pointed out two main difficulties with Kant's criterion. First, it is difficult to maintain that any maxims are absolutes, for exceptions may be justified on ethical grounds. This is especially the case where there is a conflict of duties. Hence, rules should not only be interpreted... as general prima facie duties and not absolute imperatives. Whether we actually have an obligation to do something would **depend upon the context**. Kant's categorical imperative is thus too formal and empty to serve as the sole guide for conduct. Second, the test of a rule is not formal consistency with the moral order, as Kant thought, but

depends upon the examination of the consequences of action. It is because consequences are viewed as destructive to morality in an empirical sense that a rational agent decides to forbear. Kant's categorical imperative does serve us in ethical decision-making as one factor to consider, among others, but not as a decisive or single criterion."¹⁰

⁹ For the possibility of a Kantian to desire the good end of a good act, see the contributory essay of Professor Shelly Kagan, "Kantianism for Consequentialists" in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals Immanuel Kant* edited by Allen W. Wood with contributions of J. B. Schneewind, Marcia Baron, Shelly Kagan and Allen W. Wood, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002, contributory essay number three (3). Also see David Cummiskey's "Korgaard's Rejection of Consequentialism" in *Metaphilosophy* Vol. 42, No. 4, July 2011.

¹⁰ Paul Kurtz, *The Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism*, Prometheus Books, New York, 2008, pages 110-111. Emphases are mine.





THESIS

The traditional formulation of the categorical imperative is no longer applicable. It needs a radical reinterpretation and a thorough reevaluation for it to become more relevant and utterly practical in the light of the present time.

The reconstituted and amended categorical imperative will be a more suitable practical guide, a personal moral guide to action, that shall help us to evaluate the situation before we eventually decide.+

A Dangerous Tendency in Kant's Moral Philosophy

If lying is wrong absolutely for Kant, yet he allowed misleading truth, when applying categorically the strict tenet of the First Formulation, is that not also a form of deception and taking advantage of the lack of awareness, stupidity, and/or lack of wit of your interlocutor?

For example, let us go back to the situation at the door:

Murderer: Is Kant here?

Me: I saw him at 7/11 Katipunan two (2) hours ago.

Yes, that is not a lie, but undeniably a misleading answer, because the murderer is asking for Kant NOW, that very moment; NOT TWO (2) HOURS AGO!

Why can't we just tell that bloody bastard evil murderer to his or her face that: He's NOT HERE!?! (Of course, the truth is, he's THERE in the kitchen).

The dangerous tendency here is that Kant seems to want us to become quick-witted, clever, or witty to the maximum by using or utilizing seemingly evasive, but truthful and undeniably misleading answers.

This is wrong. In my counter-view, ethics and morality are based on reason and action, not wittiness and evasion!

Kant, being true to himself, also used this kind of misleading statement/answer when confronted by a serious problem in his own life. As narrated by Professor Sandel:

“The king and his censors considered Kant's writings on religion disparaging to Christianity, and demanded that he pledge to refrain from further pronouncements on the topic. Kant responded with a carefully worded statement: “As your Majesty's faithful subject, I shall in the future completely desist from all public lectures or papers concerning religion.

“Kant was aware, that when he made his statement, that the king was not likely to live much longer. When the king died a few years later, Kant considered himself absolved of the promise, which bound him only “as your Majesty's faithful subject.” Kant later explained that he had chosen his words “most carefully, so that I should not be deprived of my freedom... forever, but only so long as His Majesty was alive. By this clever evasion, the paragon of Prussian probity succeeded in misleading the censors without lying to them.”¹¹

Yet, in times of great danger and of emergency, do you have the time, the necessary deep-level skills and the intellectual resources to construct a measured, clever, and careful answer that would be both faithful to the original, traditional and historical Formula of the Categorical Imperative, specifically that of the Universal Law and at the same time save our life or the life of our friend?

We are here on this level talking about the life of our friend and our own. What more is at stake

¹¹ Sandel, *op cit.*, 134.





if we are already talking of countless lives? How about the life, the integrity and the dignity of the nation?

In the movie, “Legends of the Fall¹²”, Anthony Hopkins, who played the character of Colonel Ludlow conversed to a Sheriff *ala* Kant in protecting one of their fugitive Indians. Consider the following exchanges between them:

Alfred: What is he wanted for, Sheriff?

John T. O’Banion: That would be of a private nature

Colonel Ludlow: A private nature? That’s a public office you hold, isn’t it, Sheriff?

Following Kant’s command, Colonel Ludlow did not lie, albeit he used his wit to show the stupidity and lack of awareness on legality by the Sheriff.

The problem with that scenario is that what if that Sheriff brought with him a valid Search Warrant and/or a Warrant of Arrest?

The purpose now is entirely public and legal. Hence, how would Colonel Ludlow or any other individual similarly situated in the given situation respond?

Do I have to remind the readers that back then, on that specific time period in American history, the “laws” were completely against the Native American Indians?

In fact, even today, the rights of those people are still being violated consistently not only by the State, but also by the Federal or National government.

My point is that it does not follow that what is legal is moral. Undeniably, there are times in

our lives that when the nefarious powers that be begun to systematically violate the rights of the people, stifles the free market of ideas, besmirched common decency and viciously subverts the interest of the public as a whole and so of the general welfare; a true moral agent faithful in the politico-ethical tradition of Kant have no choice nor alternative but to take the laws itself into his or her hands.

The duty of the moral agent and the future and/or potential revolutionary

To merely criticize the evil powers that be and to speak truth to power is not enough, given the critical and crucial circumstances. The moral agent or the future and/or potential revolutionary must lead the people to get back power, to save the laws, and re-purify the sources in order for them to reclaim their humanity and dignity by asserting their individual and collective autonomy and universal responsibility.

An illustrative case:

In the movie, “Scent of a Woman¹³” Chris O’Donnell, who played the character of Charlie Simms, witnesses three students setting up a

prank that publicly humiliates the headmaster, Mr. Trask.”

The headmaster, Mr. Trask, during the Joint Student-Faculty Disciplinary Tribunal, tried to force and blackmail Charlie, yet despite all of the threats thrown against him, he did not reveal the names of the three (3) students who committed a prank act against Mr. Trask, even if he knew them.

Yes, he did not lie, but did he conceal the truth?

¹² Is a 1994 American epic historical drama film.

¹³ Is a 1992 American drama film.





The speech of Al Pacino¹⁴, who played the character of Army Ranger Lieutenant Colonel Frank Slade, is worthy of importance and attention, hence I am quoting them lengthily:

Slade: "Outta order? I'll show you outta order! You don't know what outta order is, Mr. Trask! I'd show you but I'm too old; I'm too tired; I'm too fuckin' blind. If I were the man I was five years ago I'd take a FLAME-THROWER to this place! Outta order. Who the hell you think you're talkin' to? I've been around, you know? There was a time I could see. And I have seen boys like these, younger than these, their arms torn out, their legs ripped off. But there isn't nothin' like the sight of an amputated spirit; there is no prosthetic for that. You think you're merely sendin' this splendid foot-soldier back home to Oregon with his tail between his legs, but I say you are executin' his SOUL!! And why?! Because he's not a Baird man! Baird men, ya hurt this boy, you're going to be Baird Bums, the lot of ya. And Harry, Jimmy, Trent, wherever you are out there, FUCK YOU, too!

Mr. Trask: Stand down, Mr. Slade!

Slade: "I'm not finished! As I came in here, I heard those words, "cradle of leadership." Well, when the bough breaks, the cradle will fall. And it has fallen here; it has fallen. Makers of men; creators of leaders; be careful what kind of leaders you're producin' here. I don't know if Charlie's silence here today is right or wrong.

"I'm not a judge or jury. But I can tell you this: he won't sell anybody out to buy his future!! And that, my friends, is called integrity! That's called courage! Now that's the stuff leaders should be made of. Now I have come to the crossroads in my life. I always knew what the right path was. Without exception, I knew. But I never took it. **You know why? It was too damn hard. Now here's Charlie. He's come to the crossroads. He has chosen a path. It's the right path. It's a path made of principle -- that leads to character. Let him continue on his journey.**

¹⁴ He won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his performance in this film. This is Pacino's sole award in that category at the said Academy --- so far.

"You hold this boy's future in your hands, committee. It's a valuable future. Believe me. Don't destroy it! Protect it. Embrace it. It's gonna make ya proud one day -- I promise you."¹⁵

This is in conformity with the conclusion of Kenny Rogers's song, "The Coward of the County"¹⁶: "Sometimes you gotta fight when you're a man."

Fighting does not only mean telling the truth, but it also means not giving up or selling out. In the immortal words of Albert Camus:

"The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion."

Special Rules on the Reconstruction of the Categorical Imperative in Exceptional Circumstances when Specifically Dealing with Evil

General Rule: Do not lie, observe the command, and obey the duty of the Universal Law.

Exception to the Rule: in conflict between two duties, *i.e.*, the duty to tell the truth and the duty to save lives, lying or denying in these particular instances is allowed and permissible.

The rationale and the moral force of this rule is that: **the duty to save lives is far more important and undeniably outweighs the duty to tell the truth.**

Exception to the Exception of the Rule: in confronting and dealing with evil, denying, concealing, and lying are not only allowed and

¹⁵ Lifted from: <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/MovieSpeeches/specialengagements/moviespeechscentofawoman.html>. Emphases are mine.

¹⁶ It is a country song written by Roger Bowling and Billy Ed Wheeler, and recorded by American country music singer Kenny Rogers. The song was released in November 1979."





permissible, but incontestably justifiable, and indeed, it is both a right and a moral duty.

Kant himself said in his *Lecture on Ethics* that we must not allow ourselves to be used by evil. **In such a situation, our lying becomes a form of defense.**

As Kant says in the said lecture:

“If we were to be at all times punctiliously truthful, we might often become victims of the wickedness of others who were ready to abuse our truthfulness. If all men were well-intentioned, it would not only be a duty not to lie, but no one would do so because there would be no point in it. But as men are malicious, it cannot be denied that to be punctiliously truthful is often dangerous... if I cannot save myself by maintaining silence, then my lie is a weapon of defense. (LE 228).”¹⁷

Based on the tenor of the Formula of Humanity and its corresponding twin, and in my view, primordial Principle/Law of Autonomy --- the moral agent does not only have the power to interpret the various Laws of the Categorical Imperative as a whole but do have the necessary inherent capacity to implement and execute its reconstruction base on his or her discretion and appreciation of the specialness and peculiarity of the specific situation or particular unique circumstances.

In the words of Professor Korsgaard:

“The Formula of Humanity and its corollary, the vision of a Kingdom of Ends, provide an ideal to live up to in daily life as well as a long-term political and moral goal for humanity. **But it is not feasible always to live up to this ideal, where the attempt to live up to it would make you a tool of evil, you should not do so.** In evil circumstances, but only then, **the Kingdom of Ends can become a goal to seek rather than an ideal to live up to, and this will provide us**

with some guidance. The Kantian priorities --- of justice over the pursuit of obligatory ends, and of respect over benevolence --- **still help us to see what matters most.**”¹⁸

For Man does not only have the power to confront his situation, he also has the capacity to modify, and if he so desired, he can and may alter and/or change his condition! He can mold and will the circumstances to his liking and intention! He/we can will the will.

Undeniably, this radical reading and reconstruction of Kant’s moral philosophy will lead to the incontestable conclusion of Man and the people/citizens for the Right to a Revolution.

KANT ON THE RIGHT TO REVOLUTION

There will never be a really free and enlightened state until the state comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived.

— Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*

Kant held, all values are made so by the free acts of men, and called values only so far as they are this, there is no value higher than the individual.

--- Professor Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*

One has a moral responsibility to defy unjust laws.

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

Professor Reiss noted that Karl Marx¹⁹ called Immanuel Kant’s philosophy as “the German theory of the French revolution.”²⁰ Further, he also stated that Kant is the philosopher of

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, page 153. Emphases are mine.

¹⁹ See Karl Marx, *The Philosophical Manifesto of the Historical School of Law* (1842), in Marx and Engels, *Collective Writings*, Vol. 2, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1975, page 203. Can also be seen from the journal article of Professor Lea Ypi, “On Revolution in Kant and Marx” in *Political Theory* 2014, Vol. 42 (3), Sage Publications, page 263.

²⁰ Hans Siegberg Reiss, “Kant and the Right of Rebellion,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17, No. 2 (1956), page 179.

¹⁷ Korsgaard, *op cit.*, page 144.





the American and French revolutions “for he asserted the independence of the individual in the face of authority, and put the problem of human freedom at the core of his philosophy.”²¹

Nonetheless, I also concur with Professor Reiss’s assertion that, “if he is the philosophical champion of the ideas of 1776 and 1789, he is guilty of a curious discrepancy.”²²

Some commentators even called that discrepancy as Kant’s inconsistency, contradiction, and a grave violation of his own politico-moral philosophy.

How could a man who wholeheartedly supported the French Revolution, even up to its bloodiest period, condemn all kinds of revolution --- in his writings?

Indeed, Kant’s view on the revolution is utterly paradoxical.

According to Professor Lewis W. Beck:

“It is easy to suppose that Kant could have asserted the right of resistance to a tyrannical government which denied autonomy to the legislation of the citizens.”²³

Hence, Kant’s condemnation of the revolution in many of his published writings is shocking to his followers.

According to Professor Korsgaard,

“In the *Metaphysical Principles of Justice*, Kant argues that “there is no right of sedition, much less a right of revolution” and concludes that “It is the people’s duty to endure even the most intolerable abuse of supreme authority (MPJ 6: 320). In “*On the Common Saying: ‘This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice,’*” Kant says:

“All resistance against the supreme legislative power, all incitement of the subjects to violent expressions of discontent, all defiance, which breaks out into rebellion, is the greatest and the punishable crime in the commonwealth, for it destroys its very foundations. This prohibition is absolute. And even if the power of the state or its agent, the head of state, has violated the original contract by authorizing the government to act tyrannically, and has thereby, in the eyes of the subjects, forfeited the right to legislate, the subject is still not entitled to offer counter-resistance. (TP 8: 299)”²⁴

This, in my view, is a great contradiction in Kant and a grave violation of his formulations of the Categorical Imperative (whether his own formulation or my own version or reconstruction).

If he truly values the autonomy, the rationality, and freedom of people, then why the hell on earth is he preaching a philosophy that is based not only on quietism but also on apathy and resignation? Further, in my view, his counsel for patience is not only defeatist but misplaced.

Is it part of my/our autonomy and rationality to merely just accept the unjust blows of the state and endure its tyranny?

What happened to that philosophy of Freedom, which is one of the hearts of his moral philosophy?

Am I free if the tyrannical government is violating my rights as a person and as a citizen?

What kind of citizen am I if the tyrannical government is abusing the rights of my people and I am not doing anything?

In the words of Charles Darwin:

“If the misery of the poor be caused not by the law of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, page 179.

²² *Ibid.*, page 179.

²³ Beck, *op cit.*, page 412.

²⁴ Christine M. Korsgaard in “Taking the Law into Our Own Hands: Kant on the Right to Revolution”, in *Reclaiming the History of Ethics, Essays for John Rawls*, ed. Andrew Reath *et al*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, page 235.





Kant's "root" of inconsistency: his static conception of natural law and his denial of the conflict between duties

In the meticulous and insightful words of Professor Lewis W. Beck:

"He does not accept the doing of evil that good may result. He does not do so in part because his political ethics reduces to the maxim of my station and its duties except in so far as complaining and striving to reform a government are imprescriptible rights; and in part because his conception of natural law is static. Not only it is static; it is, in fact, inconsistent, for it includes both teleology if seeking to bring about the rule of law under a republican constitution (which may, in fact, require not merely efforts at reform but actual violence) and a formalism of obedience to the powers that be. The duty we have to contribute to the progress of mankind is a duty of imperfect obligations, it is unenforceable, and leaves elbow-room for its realizations. The latter, the duty we have to fulfill the requirements of the established law, is a duty of strict or perfect obligations, and is thus, for Kant, prior in its claims to the former. As consequences of this priority of duties of perfect over duties of imperfect obligation are those famous cases which have served for generations as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Kantian ethics, e.g., the denial of the right to lie in order to save the life of an innocent man. A like consequence is here drawn in Kant's political philosophy. We are to work towards the end of the improvement of mankind by striving to secure a political stage in which the rights of man will be respected and war will be abolished. But in doing so, we are not to overthrow by violence even a tyrannical government which blatantly traduces these rights, for to do this would conflict with a duty of perfect obligation. We are not, therefore, justified in killing a tyrant in order to preserve the lives of thousands or millions of his subjects. The most I can morally do is to expose the abuses of his power and make proposals for his reform, to disobey him if he commands me to do something immoral and to suffer martyrdom if necessary."²⁵

With all due respect to Kant, this is indubitably absurd and utterly outrageous!

²⁵ Lewis W. Beck, *op cit.*, Kant and the Right to Revolution, pages 419-420. Emphases are mine.

I know for a fact that on this matter he is troubled by his religious baggage and perhaps by the specific political condition he is in, but I cannot help but wonder, if he truly believed in what he wrote or it is the case that he is merely trying to confuse the powers that be by giving them some vague views and contradictory messages/positions?

According to Professor Beck, Kant's disciple, August Wilhelm Rehberg, in *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, wrote by way of responding to his teacher's negative view of the revolution, the following remarkable words:

"If a system of a priori demonstrated positive specifications of natural law is applied to the world of men, nothing less than a complete dissolution of present civil constitution would follow. For according to such a system, only that constitution is valid which accords with the determination of the ideal of reason. In this case, no one of the existing constitutions could stand... if these constitutions contradict... the first requirements of a rational constitution, the human race is not only permitted, it is required, to destroy these constitutions, which are opposed to the original law. The form of the constitution of the state is a matter of indifference, so long as complete equality is established; but to establish this, everything else must be sacrificed. Thus, the theory of revolution is a necessary consequence of the physiocratic system."²⁶

This is precisely the very logical conclusion we shall reach and derive, if we follow closely the Kantian premises.

SELF-CONSTITUTION²⁷

I am the law unto myself, principles, commands, and laws that I arrived at; imposed and legislated unto and for myself based on reason. It is in this

²⁶ Beck, *op cit.*, pages 412-413.

²⁷ The author is inspired by the works of Professor Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Edited by Professor Onora O' Neill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 and *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.





sense that it is my own act of self-affirmation; for it empowers by my own self-reference, and it is its own justification.

For “freedom is obedience, but ‘obedience to a law which we prescribed to ourselves’”²⁸ and that is the only way wherein we may say that we are truly autonomous: by following the constitution of ourselves.

In times of darkness and bloody mayhem being systematically perpetrated by the powers that be against my/our/the people, it would be for me as an individual and citizen of the said society, the heights of immorality, treachery to freedom, and betrayal of my rationality to retreat to my comfort zone, withdraw, and emigrate to my inner self. This is against all reason, freedom, and rationality. Further, this is also a grave violation of my autonomy and the laws that I enacted for myself.

Hence, to rebel, to resist, to revolt, and to launch an insurrection or revolution against the evil regime of the powers that be is to affirm my self-constitution and my autonomy. Incontestably, **it is the moral duty and ethical obligation of the moral agent, the agents of change, and the revolutionary to pursue and unleash the revolution --- for the vindication of morality itself and the defense of Humanity.**

In the words of Professor Isaiah Berlin:

“For if the essence of men is that they are autonomous beings --- authors of values, of ends in themselves, the ultimate authority of which consist precisely in the fact that they are willed freely --- then nothing is worse than to treat them as if they are not autonomous, but natural objects, played on by causal influences, creatures

at the mercy of external stimuli, whose choices can be manipulated by their rulers, whether by threats of force or offers of rewards. To treat men in this way is to treat them as if they were not self-determined.”²⁹

KANT’S *DOCTRINE OF RIGHT* IS NOT RIGHT

Kant’s *Doctrine of Right* is not right, not because it is completely wrong. He is right in persuading the people to obey the government and the law, but **he is wrong to command the citizens to obey the powers that be --- even if it is tyrannical and abusive.** He is wrong to claim that there could never be a right to rebellion, much less a right to revolution, for it is against the law, and it will constitute an inconsistency.

In the categorical words of Professor David Cummiskey, drawing logically from Kantian premises:

There are circumstances which require a Kantian to be a revolutionary. Whether Kant likes it or not, this is indeed the conclusion which actually follows from his arguments. Individual judgment must sometime override organized power. The Kantian principle of autonomy is the ground under, but should not be buried under, the principle of political obedience.³⁰

In concurrence with the view of Professor Cummiskey, in my view, Kant is the one who is inconsistent, and his central moral philosophy

of autonomy will contradict his counsel to the people and the citizens to observe and obey laws even if they are unjust and inhumane.

To reiterate, we are the source of all values, and there can never be a higher value than

²⁸ Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 1969, page 136.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pages 136-137.

³⁰ David Cummiskey, “Justice and Revolution in Kant’s Political Philosophy”, in *Rethinking Kant – Current Trends in American Kantian Scholarship*, Cambridge Scholar Publishers, 2008, page 241.





the human individual. Hence, he is palpably wrong on his assumption and assertion, which is an incontestable aberration and a complete negation of his moral philosophy that the source of right and law is the constitution or the law-giver or vice versa.

My counter-thesis, besides his moral philosophy, is based on the moral, legal, and political doctrine sanctioned and recognized by universal jurisdiction that **the water cannot go higher than its source.**

WE ARE THE SOURCE OF ALL VALUES, RIGHTS, AND POWER

History, morality, and culture have proved to us again and again that **there can be people without the constitution, but there can never be a constitution without the people.**

It simply means that there can be no higher right or values, *etc.*, from the source of the said right. The ultimate source of all rights is the people themselves. For it is their consent, agreement, assent, and/or concurrence to the social contract (whether the 'original' or the current one) that gives it the legal, juridical, legislative, judicial, economic order, *etc.*, its legitimacy.

It must be stressed that the laws of the government are nothing but, as the encapsulated Will of the people in a 'form', but the decisive Idea is the concurrence of the people to the same. Without that decisive element, it is useless and futile for us to even speak of any order whatsoever. Undeniably, the material force is always the people, for they are the ultimate source of all rights, laws, power, and values. The people have the power to make, remake, undo, alter, shatter, maintain, or change the public existing order.

THE MORAL RIGHT TO REVOLUTION

If Kant truly believes that "human freedom is autonomy and autonomy is morality", then to be consistent with his own moral philosophy, he has no choice but to allow the people, the citizens, and the revolutionaries to think and to decide for themselves.

As Kant himself wrote in his famous essay "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?":

"The revolution of a gifted people which we have seen unfolding in our day may succeed or miscarry; it may be filled with misery and atrocities to the point that a sensible man, were he boldly to hope to execute it successfully the second time, would never resolve to make the experiment at such cost --- this revolution, I say, nonetheless finds in the hearts of all spectators (who are not engaged in the game themselves) a wishful participation which borders on enthusiasms, the very expression of which is fraught with danger; this sympathy, therefore, can have no other cause than a moral disposition in the human race. (OQ 7: 85)"³¹

What is this moral disposition in the human race that he is talking about?

My view on this is that, he did not only sympathize with the revolution³² of those "gifted people"; he is in solidarity with them. He knows fully well, based on reason and experience that the continuous March of Reason and further development of Man and his Faculties is dependent and contingent on the people themselves in their audacious and heroic act of shaking up the whole system. In the immortal words of Marx "they have to storm the heavens." For it is only in that way that the birth of a new order or thought will come out from the womb of the old!

³¹ Korsgaard, *op cit.*, "Kant on the Right to Revolution", page 236.

³² Besides the American and the French revolutions, Kant is also a supporter of the Irish in their quest for their freedom. See Pyi, *op cit.*, page 267.





Perhaps it is also the case that he cannot say it outright, in an utterly categorical and direct manner because of the temper of the period³³ and the level of the thought of his people³⁴.

Nonetheless, he is also a revolutionary³⁵ in his own right, albeit a reluctant one.

Be that as it may, esteemed Professor Korsgaard perfectly captured the revolutionary elements of Kant's moral and political philosophy when she proclaimed that:

The moment of revolution is a vindication of morality, and so of our humanity. We are masters of our own self-mastery, in control of our self-control. Being human is not sapping our strength, for we still know when to fight. The revolutionary does not become strong and free when he picks his gun. Instead, he proves to us that he's been free all along.

It is because the laws of morality are his own laws that he is finally prepared to fight for them. The doubt created by the antimony is dispelled. **Revolution teaches us nothing but what we have known all along: that the good and the free person are one and the same.**³⁶

³³ We must always bear in mind that Kant lived then in the most militarized area of the German nation, which is Prussia. Nonetheless, I would like to stress that whatever seeming deficiency and inadequacy, contradiction or discrepancy in his philosophy specifically on the question of the right to revolution, we must always remember that Kant is not our authority, but rather our interlocutor and a moral guide. The "limitation" of his philosophy or stand to this particular question **is a challenge** for us, the modern Kantians to expand, develop and extend his ideas on this matter. Finally, to quote a contemporary of his, Goethe: "A man's greatness belongs to him; his fault to his circumstances." See also, Professor Martha Nussbaum's "On Moral Progress: A Response to Richard Rorty," 2007, University of Chicago Law Review: Vol. 74 Iss.3, Article 5, specifically page 956.

³⁴ See Professor Lea Ypi's "On Revolution in Kant and Marx", Political Theory 2014, Vol. 42 (3), page 266.

³⁵ According to Professor Lewis W. Beck, "his tentative justification of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 remained hidden in his notes." See also, "Kant and the Right to Revolution", page 413. Further, according to Professor Ypi: "Metzger, a colleague at the university of Königsberg, was astonished by the boldness with which Kant defended the Revolution against everyone, even against high-profile Prussian dignitaries. "There was a time in Königsberg," he writes, "when all the supporters of the Revolution were inserted in the black books of the authorities under the title of 'Jacobin.' Kant, however, was never troubled by this threat, and he was so well-respected that the authorities left him undisturbed." See her article, "In Revolution in Kant and Marx", page 283. The citation is from Lucien Calvie, *Le Renard et les Raisins. La Révolution Française et les Intellectuels Allemands 1798-1845* (Paris: Etudes et Documentation Internationales, 1989), page 29.

³⁶ Korsgaard, *op cit.*, "Kant on the Right to Revolution", page 262. Emphases are mine.

Indeed, Kant deserves to be called as the "Old Jacobin" of Königsberg; old, yes, but Jacobin --- undeniably true!





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