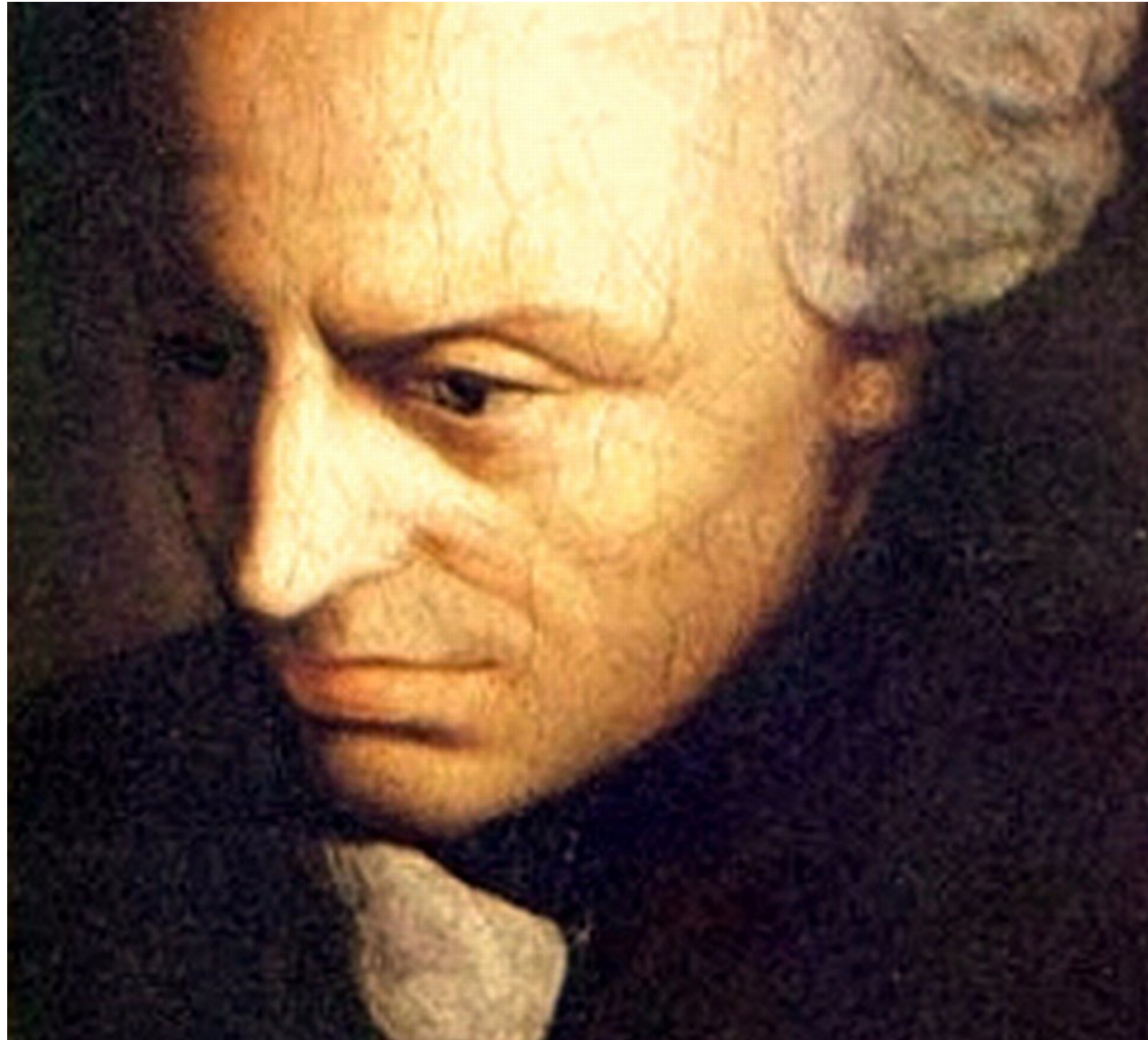


# KANTIAN ETHICS

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(1724 – 1804)



# DEONTOLOGY

- Kant is the most famous defender of a “deontological” theory.
- *Duty-based ethics (deon).*
- Main opposition to utilitarianism.



# HARRY TRUMAN

- US President in 1945.
- Dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima & Nagasaki.
- Brought the war to a speedy end.
- Each bomb obliterated an entire city.
- Many non-combatant casualties (e.g., hospitals, schools).
- Truman said he “slept like a baby.”

**Was he justified?**



# ELIZABETH ANSCOMBE

- “For men to choose to kill the innocent as a means to their ends is always murder.”
- The bombings might have saved more lives overall, but some things may not be done, no matter what.
- “You may not do evil so that good may come”.  
– Saint Paul, *Letter to the Romans*



# TWO SHOPKEEPERS

## **The Prudent Shopkeeper**

He doesn't cheat his customers because it's bad for business in the long run.

## **The Dutiful Shopkeeper**

He doesn't cheat his customers because it's the right thing to do.

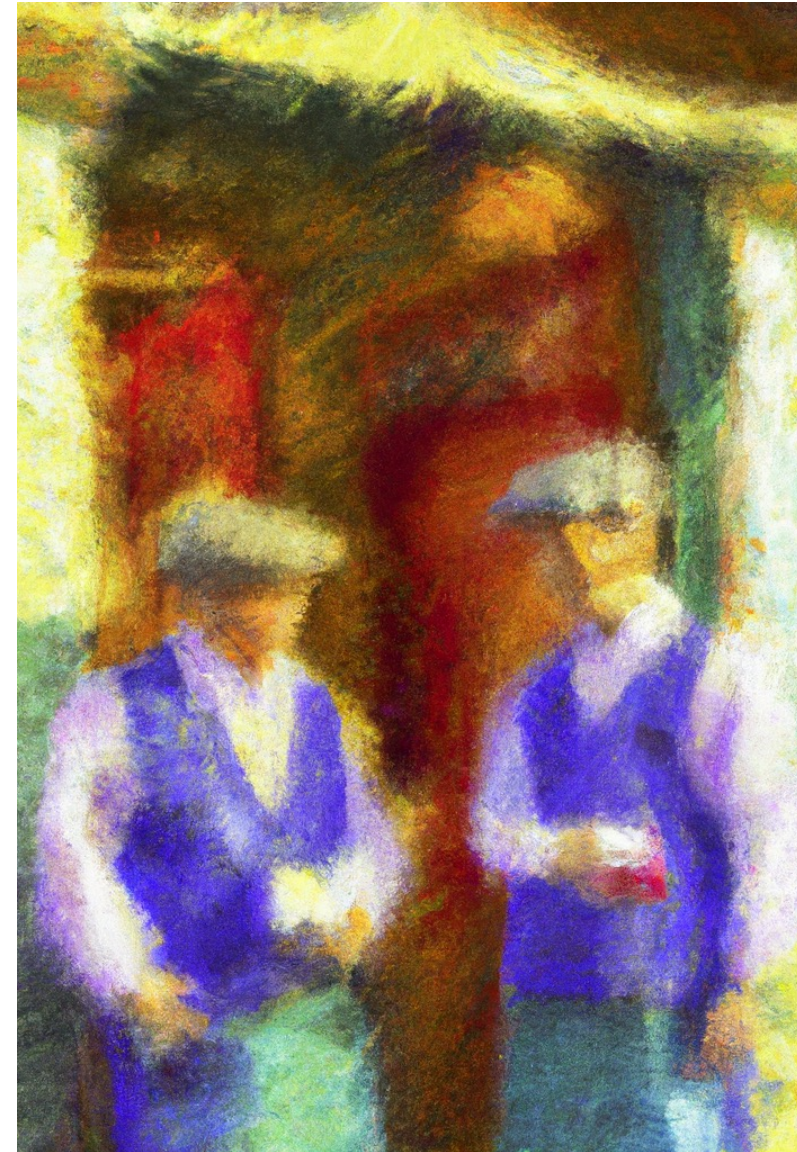


# DUTY AND MORAL WORTH

- Both actions are in accordance with duty.
- But only one of them acts for the sake of duty.
- An act must be done for the sake of duty to have moral worth.

Kant says,

“a dutiful action can have moral worth only if it is done from the motive of duty alone.”



# TWO PHILANTHROPISTS

## The Loving Philanthropist

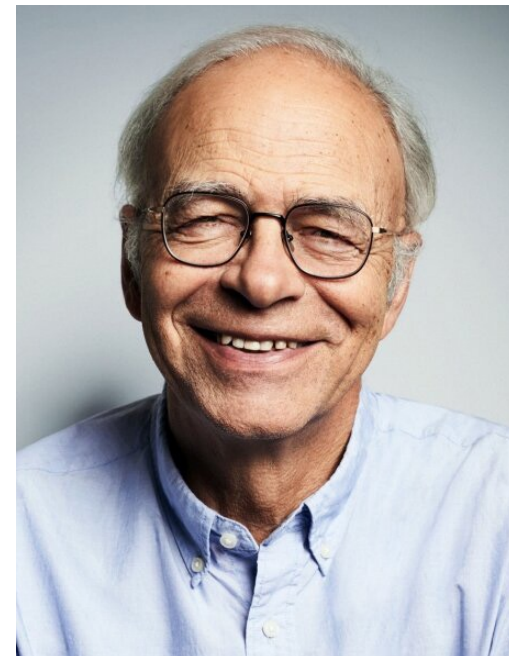
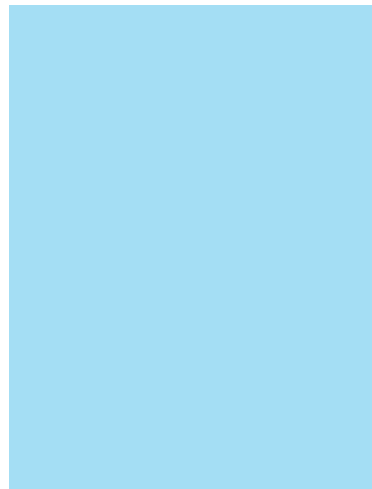
He helps others only because it brings him satisfaction.

**Kant's verdict:** "an action of this kind has *no true moral worth*."

## The Sorrowful Philanthropist

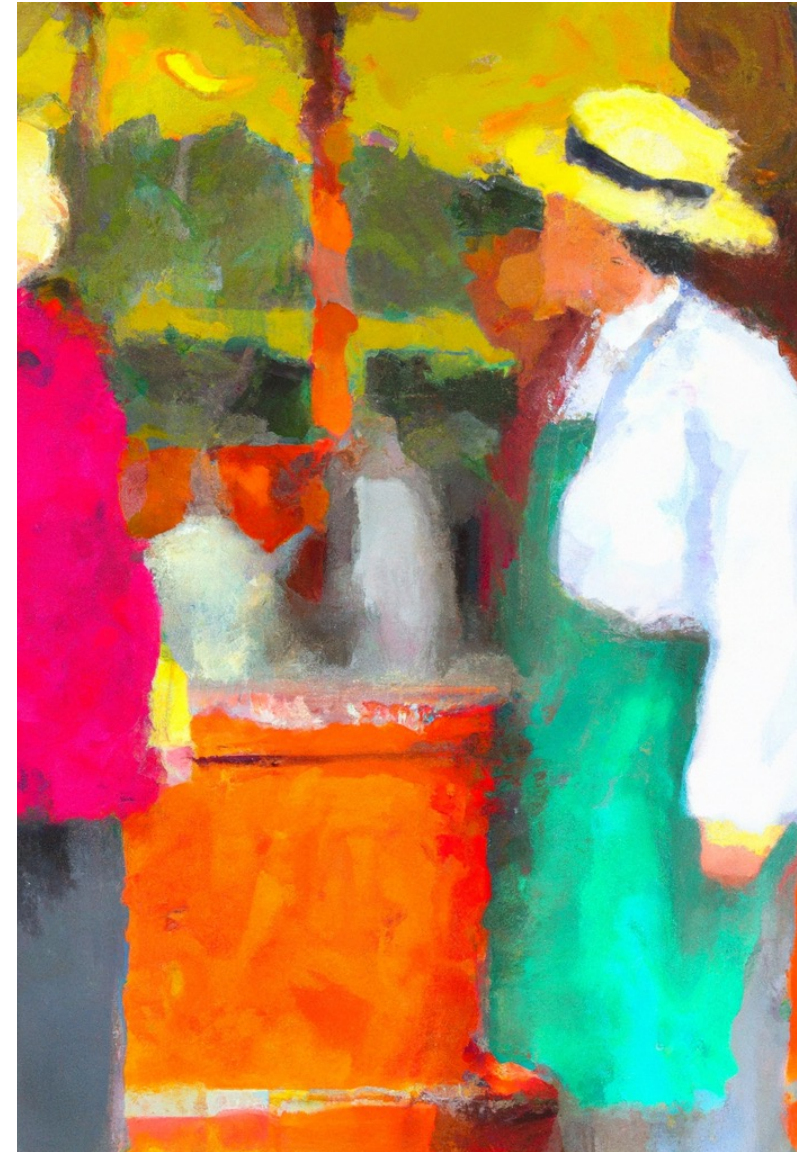
He helps others because it is his duty to do so.

**Kant's verdict:** "the action has *genuine moral worth*."



## WHY DOES “ACTING FROM DUTY” MATTER?

- When actions are done from ‘desire’ or ‘inclination’ (e.g., profit, our happiness) is they are unreliable.
- When profit leads us to dutiful actions, it does so for circumstantial reasons.
- Actions done from duty will guarantee the right action will be done – regardless of how we feel.





## MISINTERPRETING KANT

Richard Henson writes,

“Surely the most obvious way of generalizing from Kant’s remarks yields the doctrine that only when one acts from duty alone – “without any inclination” – does his act have moral worth.”



# THE GOOD WILL

- Having the right kind of intentions or motives.
- It doesn't matter if we fail to bring about good results.
- Doing the right thing because it is right.

Groundwork of  
the Metaphysics of  
M O R A L S

Immanuel Kant

# WHY NOT CONSEQUENTIALISM?

## **Too demanding**

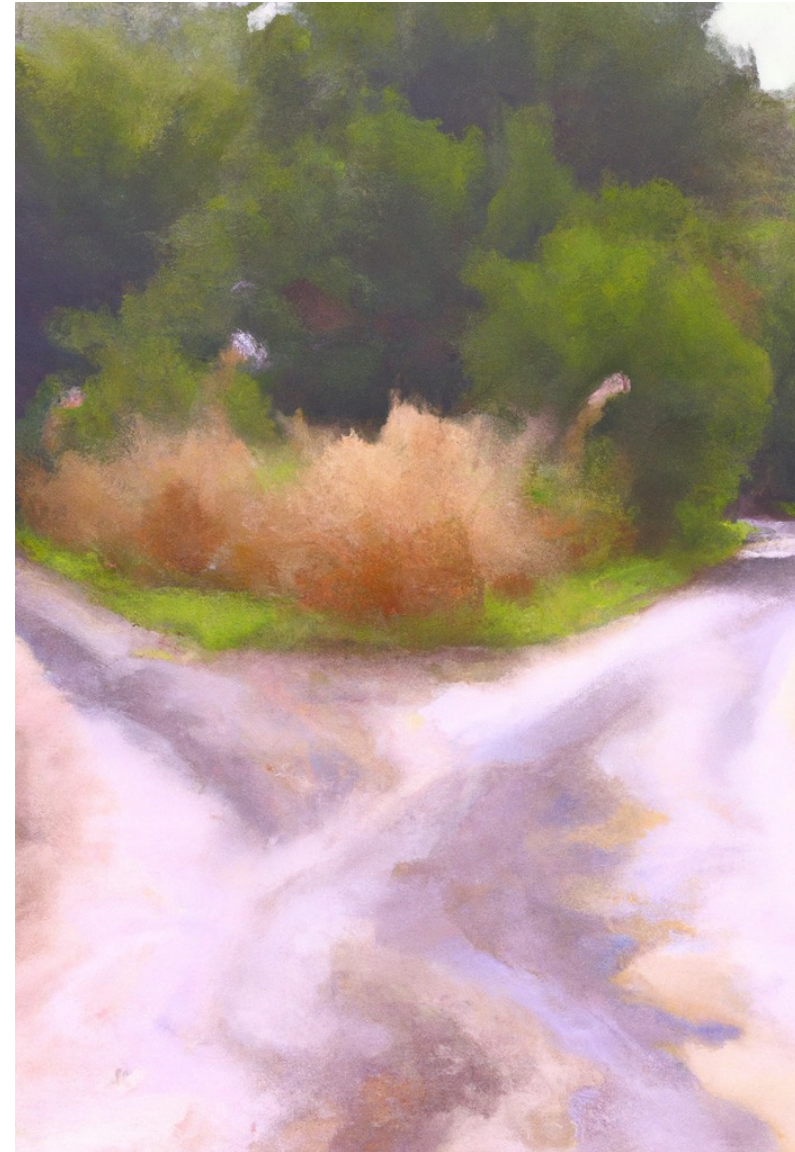
- e.g., no supererogatory acts

## **Permits seemingly bad actions if they bring about more good.**

- e.g., Peeping Tom

## **Violates our rights/allows injustice**

- e.g., torture of innocent



# IMPERATIVES: CATEGORICAL & HYPOTHETICAL

## What is an 'imperative'?

- A statement that expresses a **command, requirement, or obligation**.
- An assertion that tells someone what they **must, should, or ought** to do.

## Examples

- "You should eat your vegetables."
- "You ought to treat others with respect."



# HYPOTHETICAL IMPERATIVES

Tells us what we must (should, ought to) do in order to achieve some desired end.

Examples?

“Shut the door if you want to stay warm.”

“If you want to go to law school, study for the LSAT.”

“If you want to read Kant in the original, learn German.”



# CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVES

- Tells us something that we must or should do regardless of your desires or goals.
- They are done not for the sake of some end or goal but simply for itself.

Examples?

“Don’t lie.”

“Keep your promises.”

“Don’t murder.”



# MORALITY'S INESCAPABILITY

The categorical (moral) requirement

- is in force **even when one would rather not comply.**
- one can appropriately be **held accountable** for failing to comply, regardless of their desires or goals.
- is **inescapable** in Foot (1972)'s sense:  
the behavior "does not cease to offend. . .because the agent is indifferent to their purposes and to the disapproval he will incur by flouting them."



# TWO TYPES OF IMPERATIVES

## **Hypothetical:**

- Rules of prudence
- Vary from person to person
- Depend on our desires
- Escapable
- Easy to understand

## **Categorical:**

- Commands (laws) of morality
  - Apply to everyone
  - Derived from reason
  - Inescapable
- Somewhat mysterious





## KANT'S TWO AIMS

1. To come up with a precise statement of the principle or principles on which all of our ordinary moral judgments are based.
2. To give an account of its unconditional authority—i.e., why we should give moral requirements priority over non-moral reasons.

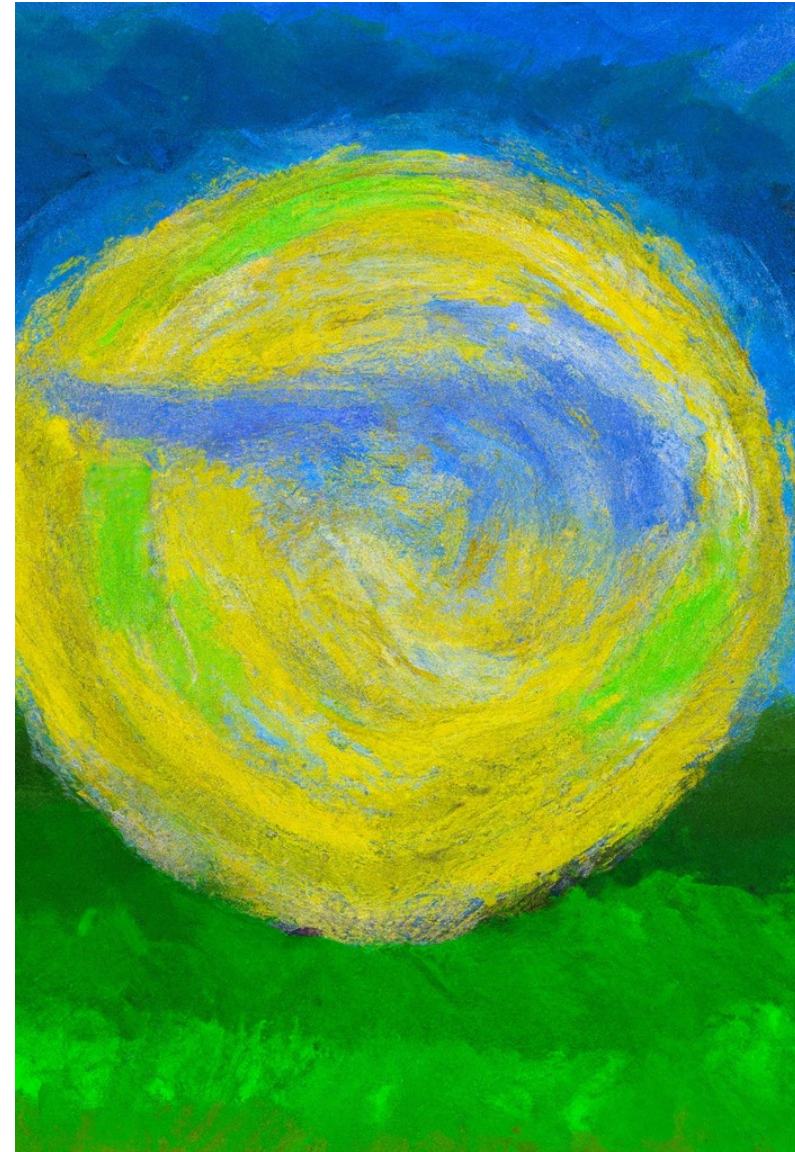


# THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Moral 'oughts' are derived from a principle that every rational person must accept:

## **The Universal Law**

“Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”



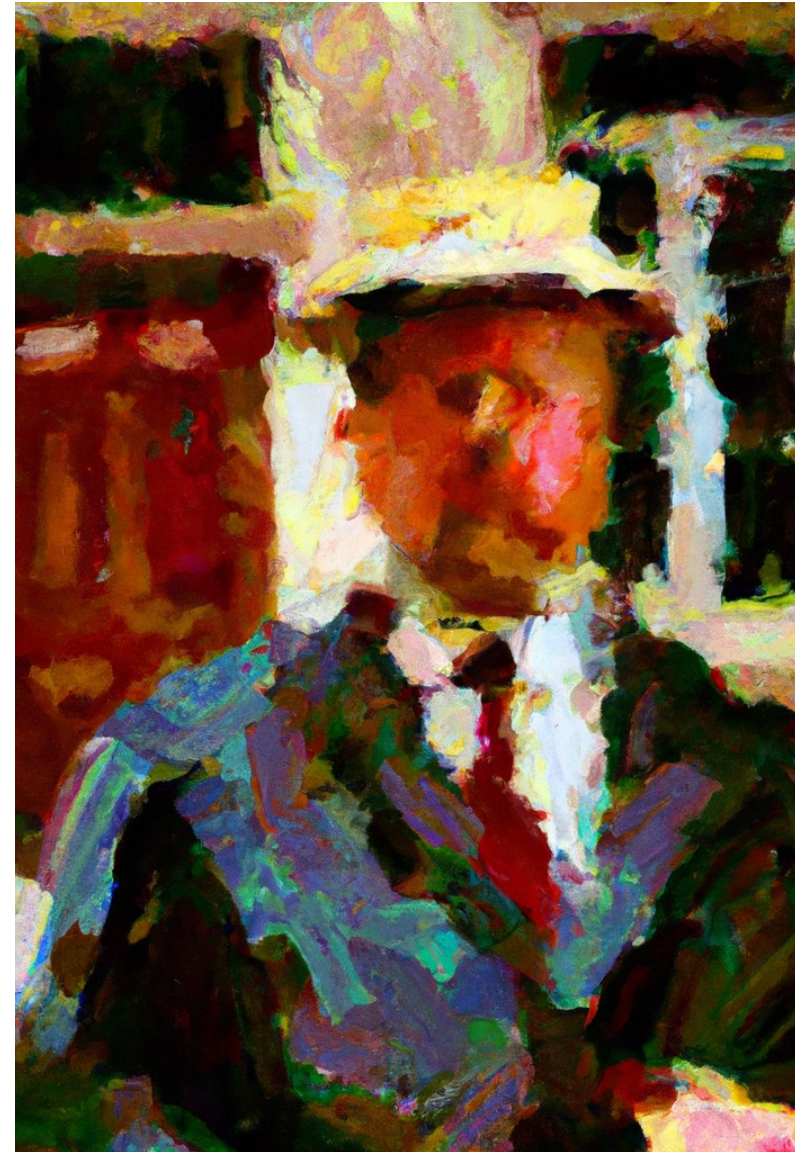
## A 'MAXIM' . . .

. . . is the rule that you would be following in carrying out an act.

Example?

- A man really needs money, and nobody will lend him it unless he promises to pay it back; however, he knows he cannot pay it back. *Should he make a false promise to get the loan?*

**The maxim would be: *Lie when it is to your advantage.***



# MAXIMS & MORALITY

*How do we determine whether an act is morally right?*

Kant's proposal:

- We must consider **what would happen if everyone always acted on that maxim.**
- Ask yourself: is it possible for you to will the maxim to be a **universal law?**



# A DECISION PROCEDURE FOR MORAL REASONING

1. Formulate your maxim.
2. Imagine a world in which everyone acts on that maxim.
3. Consider whether your maxim is even *conceivable* in a world governed by this law.
4. If it is, ask yourself whether you would, or could, rationally *will* to act on your maxim in such a world. If you could, then your action is morally permissible.



# SHOULD I LIE FOR MONEY?

## What is the relevant maxim?

- “When I need a loan to help myself, I should lie to get it.”

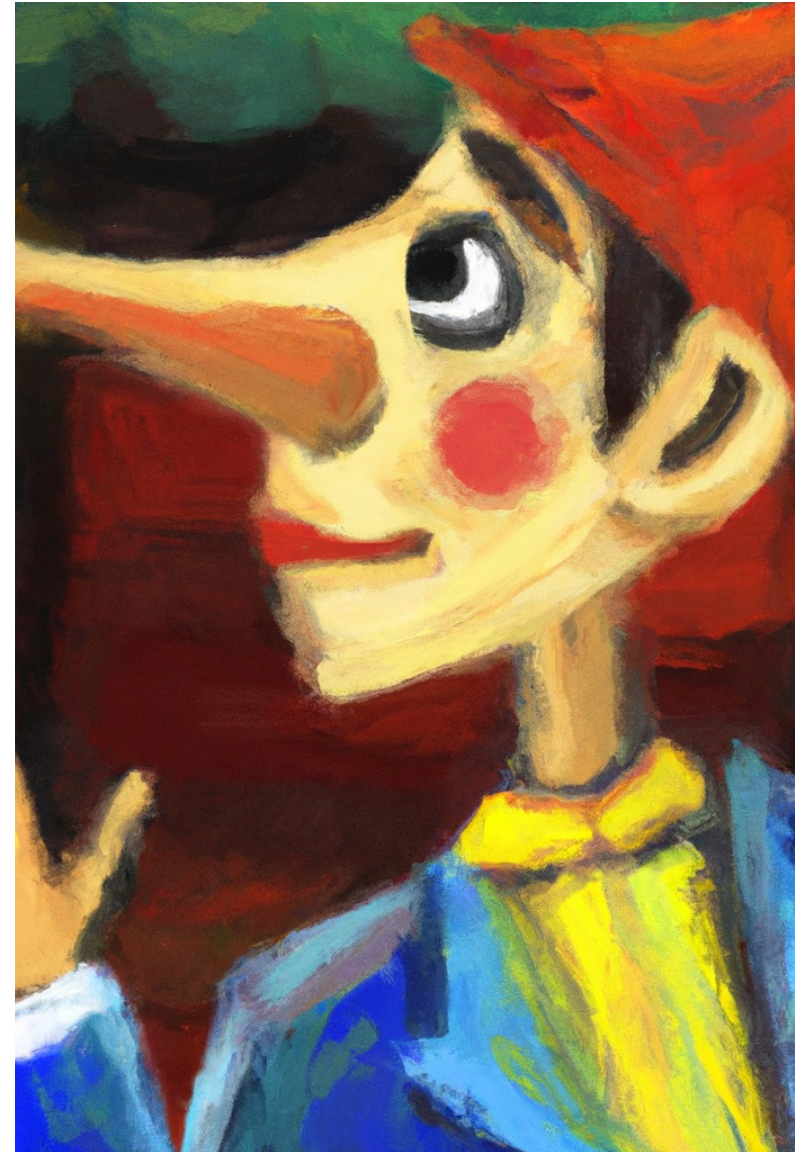
## What is the maxim when universalized?

- “Everyone may lie when it is to their advantage.”

## Can it be a moral law?

- Lying depends upon a norm of truth-telling.
- If no one paid back borrowed money, the very practice of promising and lending would cease to exist.

**Therefore, I cannot tell a lie.**



# IS LYING EVER PERMISSIBLE?

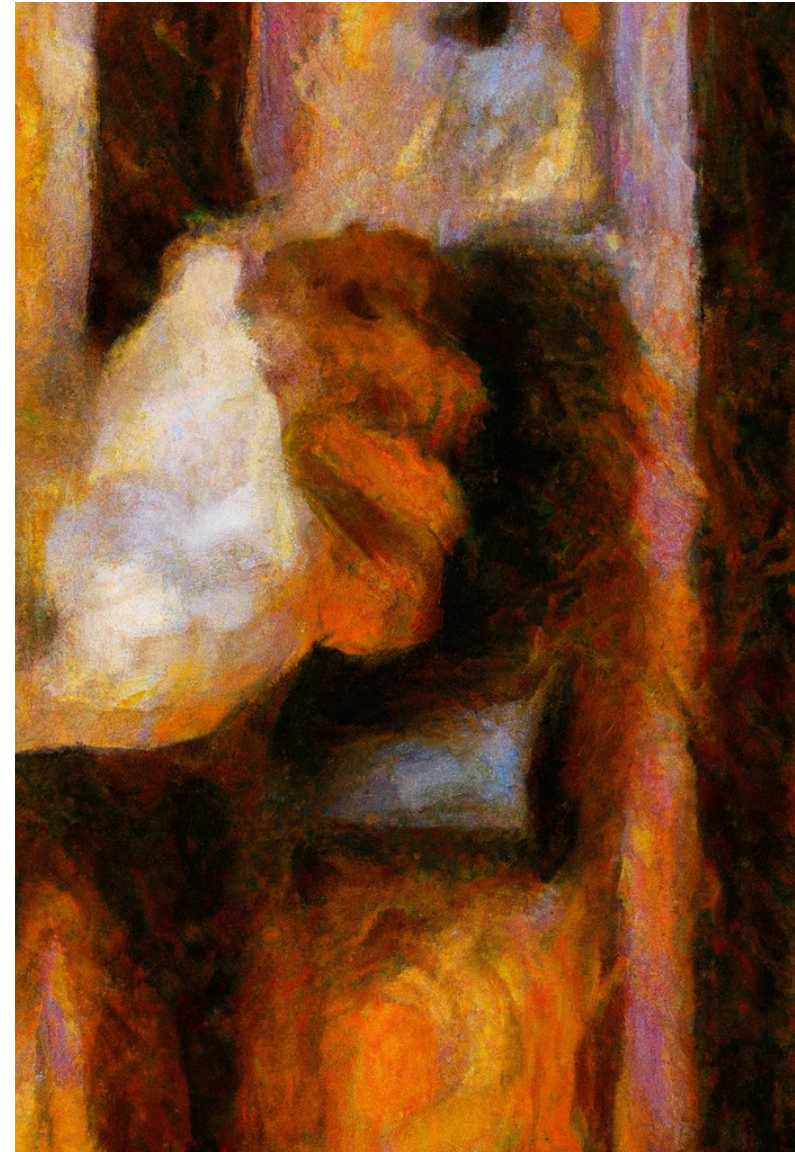
- Kant believes moral rules have no exceptions.
- It doesn't matter how good the consequences are.
- Lying under *any* circumstances is “the obliteration of one’s dignity as a human being”.



# THE INQUIRING MURDERER

- Imagine someone fleeing a murdered.
- The innocent person hides in your home.
- The murderer comes by and asks you where she is hiding.

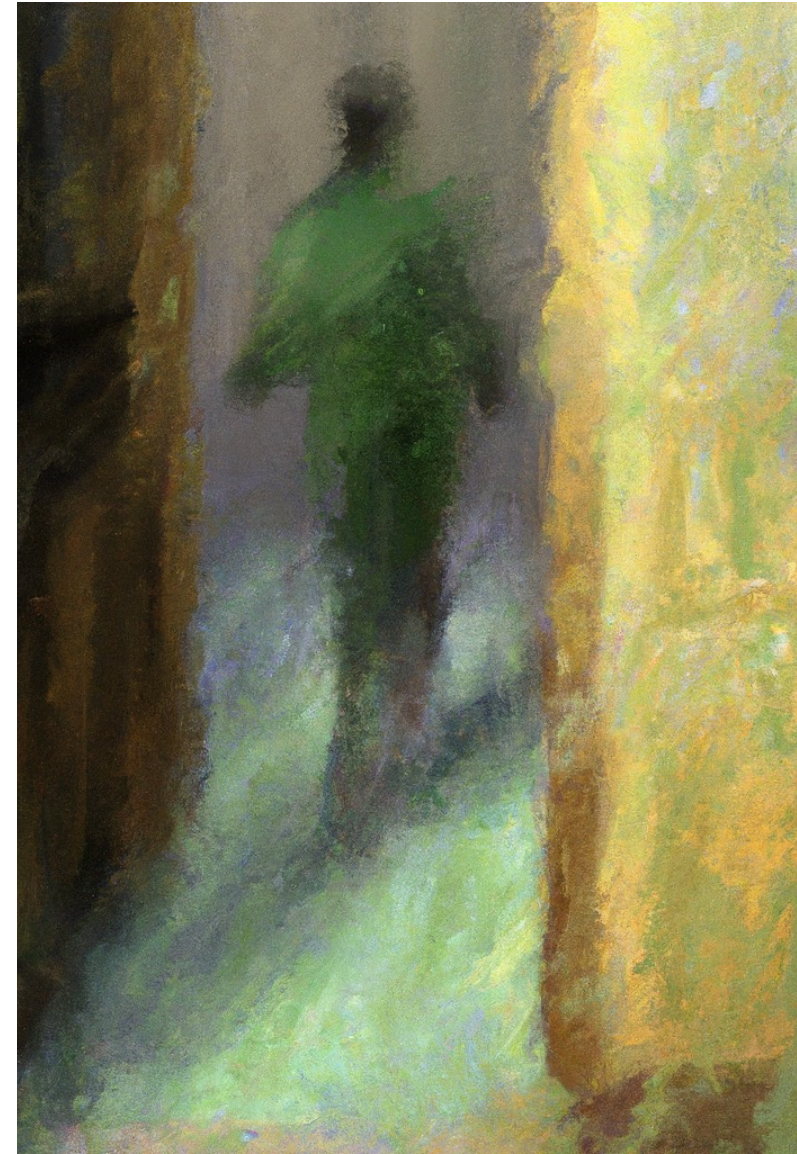
*What should you do?*





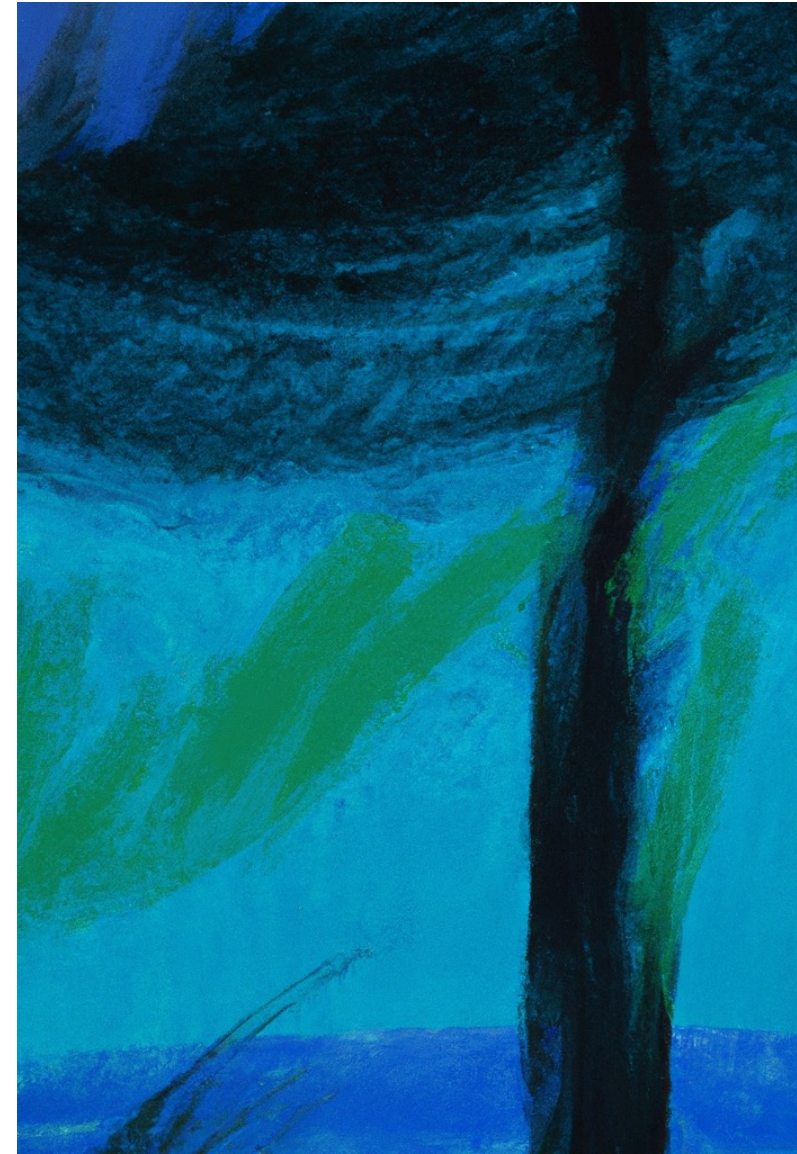
# KANT'S WORRY

- Perhaps you're mistaken about where the victim is now hiding.
- If you tell the truth, you end up leading the murderer astray.
- But if you lie, you are (partly) *responsible* for the man's death.



# KANT'S ARGUMENT

1. We are tempted to make exceptions to the rule against lying because we think the consequences of honesty will be bad and the consequences of lying will be good.
2. But we can never be certain about what the consequences will be.
3. Therefore, the best policy is to avoid the known evil, which is lying.



## PROBLEMS WITH THIS ARGUMENT

1. The argument depends on an unreasonably pessimistic view of what we can know.
2. Kant assumes that we would be morally responsible for any bad consequences of lying, but we would not be responsible for any bad consequences of telling the truth. Can we escape responsibility so easily?



# RESCUING KANT

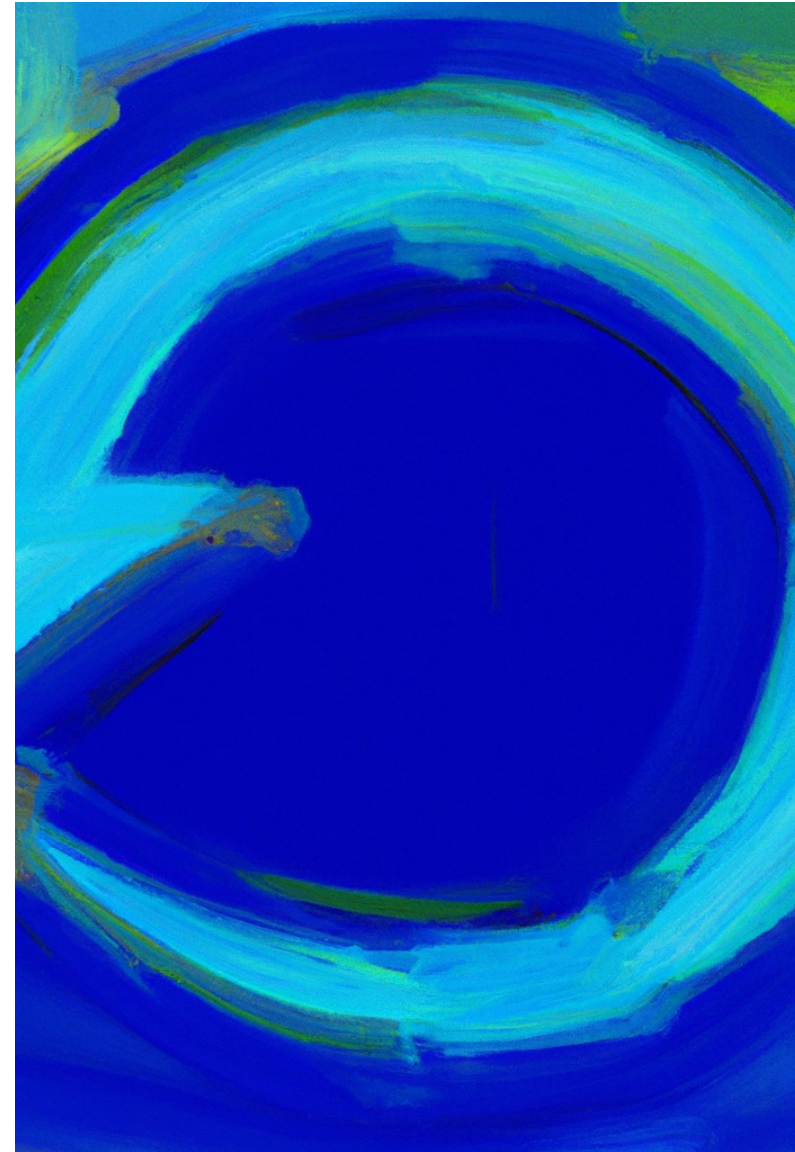
We can reformulate the relevant maxim.

Kant says the maxim would be:

**“It is OK to lie.”**

But why wouldn't our rule be:

**“I will lie when doing so would save an innocent life.”**



# THE PROBLEM OF FORMULATING MAXIMS

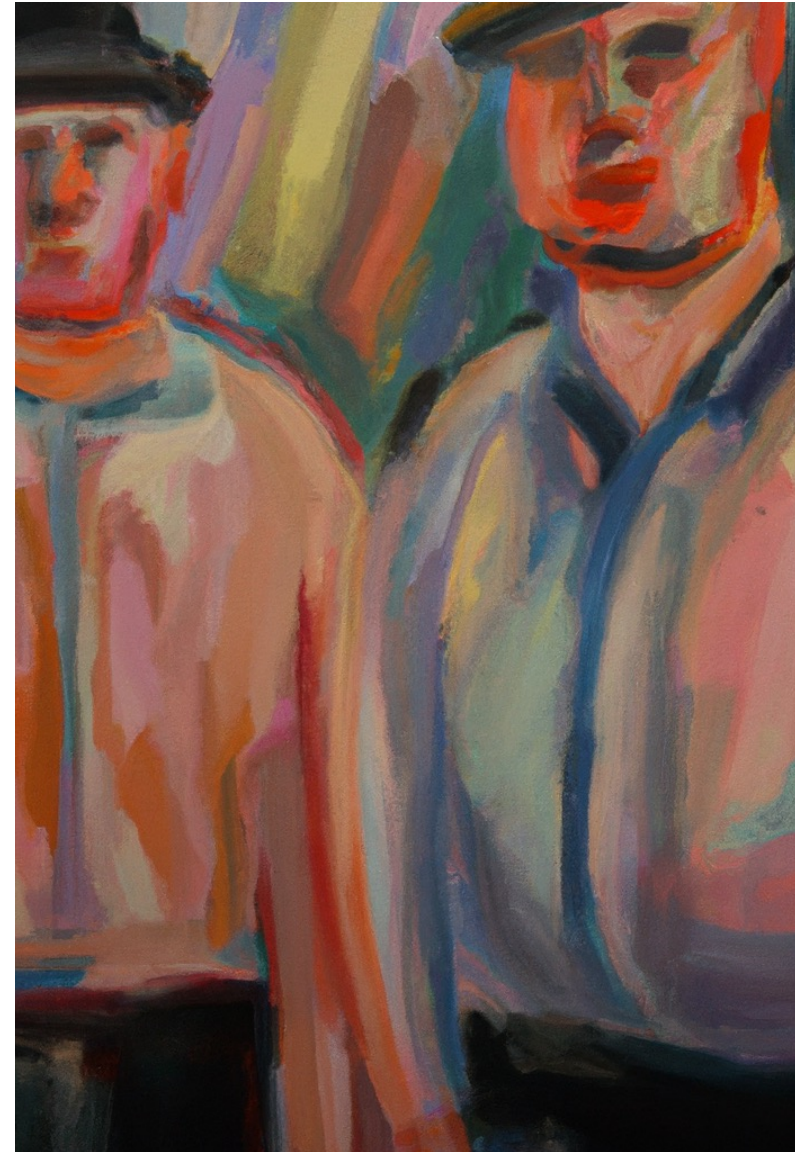
**Ralph and Ronnie. Both falsely promise to repay their friend for the \$100 they borrow from her.**

Ralph acts on the maxim:

*“Whenever I need money, and can get it by promising to pay it back even when I cannot, then I shall promise to pay it back.”*

This maxim **cannot be universalized.**

So, the act is morally wrong.



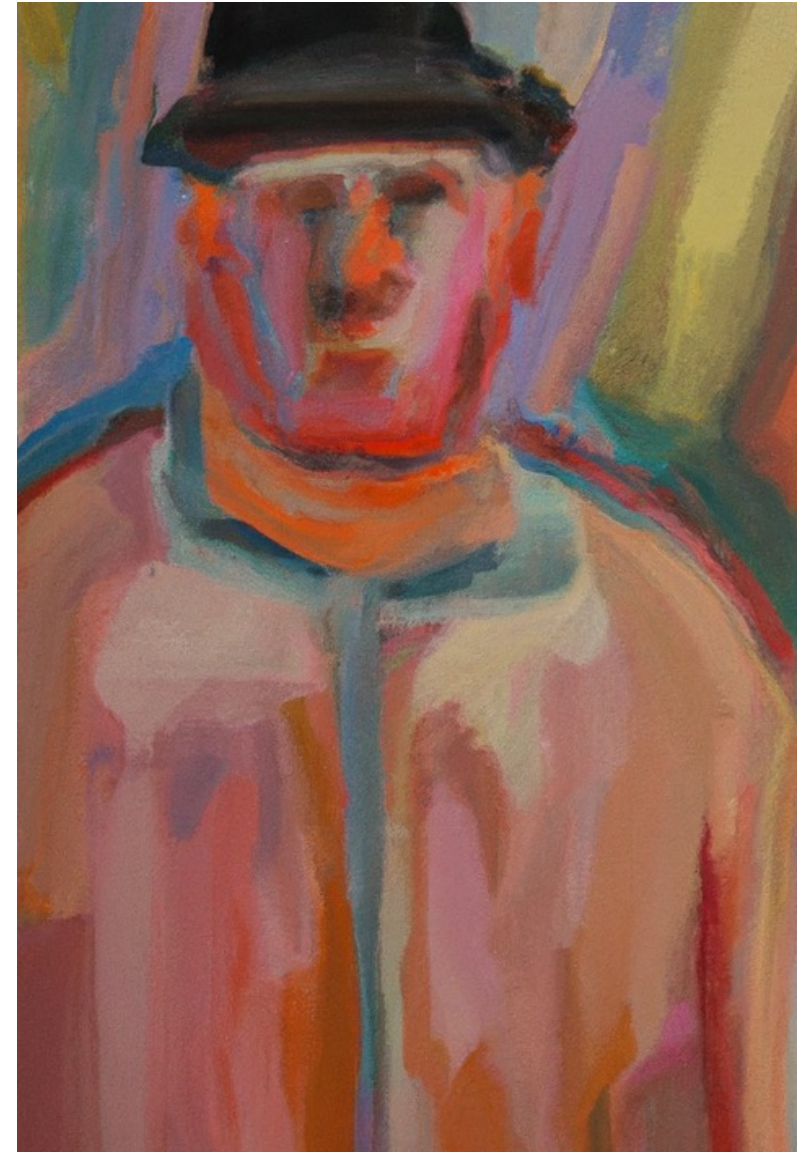
## RONNIE'S MAXIM

Ronnie acts on the maxim:

- “Whenever I need money, and it’s between 12:48pm and 12:49pm on a Wednesday, and I weigh exactly 167 pounds, and my name rhymes with “onnie”, and I ate 2 bagels earlier in the day, and I can get money by promising to pay it back even when I cannot, then I shall promise to pay it back.”

According to the Categorical Imperative. . .

- Ralph’s false promise is morally wrong.
- Ronnie false promise is morally right.



# HOW TO FORMULATE YOUR MAXIM

An act is morally permissible if, and only if, its maxim is universalizable.

A maxim has two parts:

- It states what you are about to do.
- It states why you are about to do it (your reason for action).

To articulate your maxim, ask yourself:

- What features of my circumstances are relevant to my action and my reasons?
- Would it be arbitrarily specific?



# THE UNIVERSAL LAW — REVISITED

1. Formulate your maxim.
2. Imagine a world in which everyone acts on that maxim.
3. Consider whether your maxim is even **conceivable** in a world governed by this law.
4. If it is, ask yourself whether you would, or could, rationally **will to act on your maxim** in such a world. If you could, then your action is morally permissible.

## Two types of contradiction:

“Some actions are so constituted that their maxim **cannot even be thought without contradiction** as a universal law of nature, much less could one will that it ought to become one.”

“With others, that internal impossibility is not to be encountered, but it is impossible to will that their maxims should be elevated to the universality of a natural law, because **such a will would contradict itself.**”



# THE TAX CHEAT

A person decides to cheat on his income taxes.

He thinks, “The government will not really be injured, and I will be much happier.”

## **The maxim:**

You shouldn't pay your taxes when it's to your benefit.

## **The problem of universalization:**

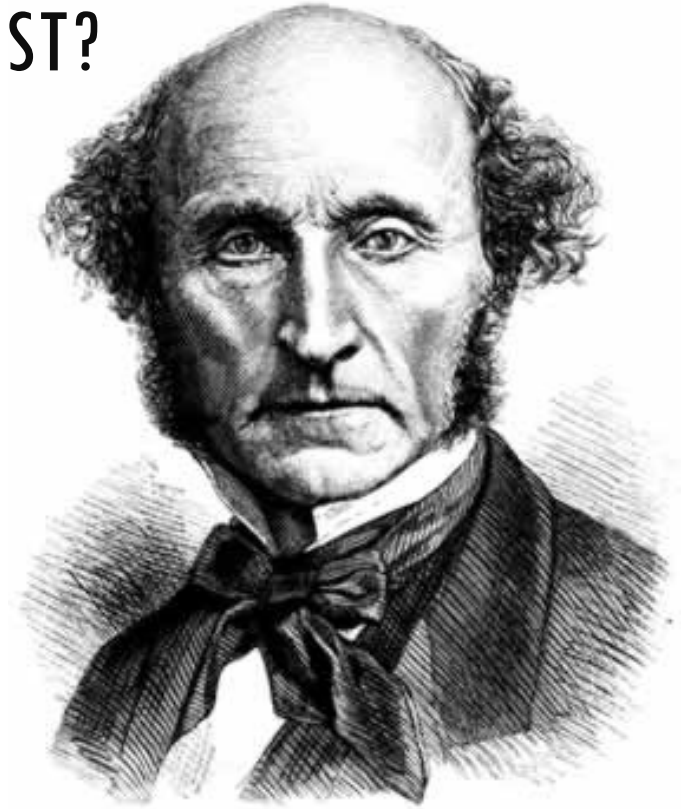
If everyone didn't pay their taxes, the government would soon go broke!



# IS KANT (REALLY) A CONSEQUENTIALIST?

Mill says,

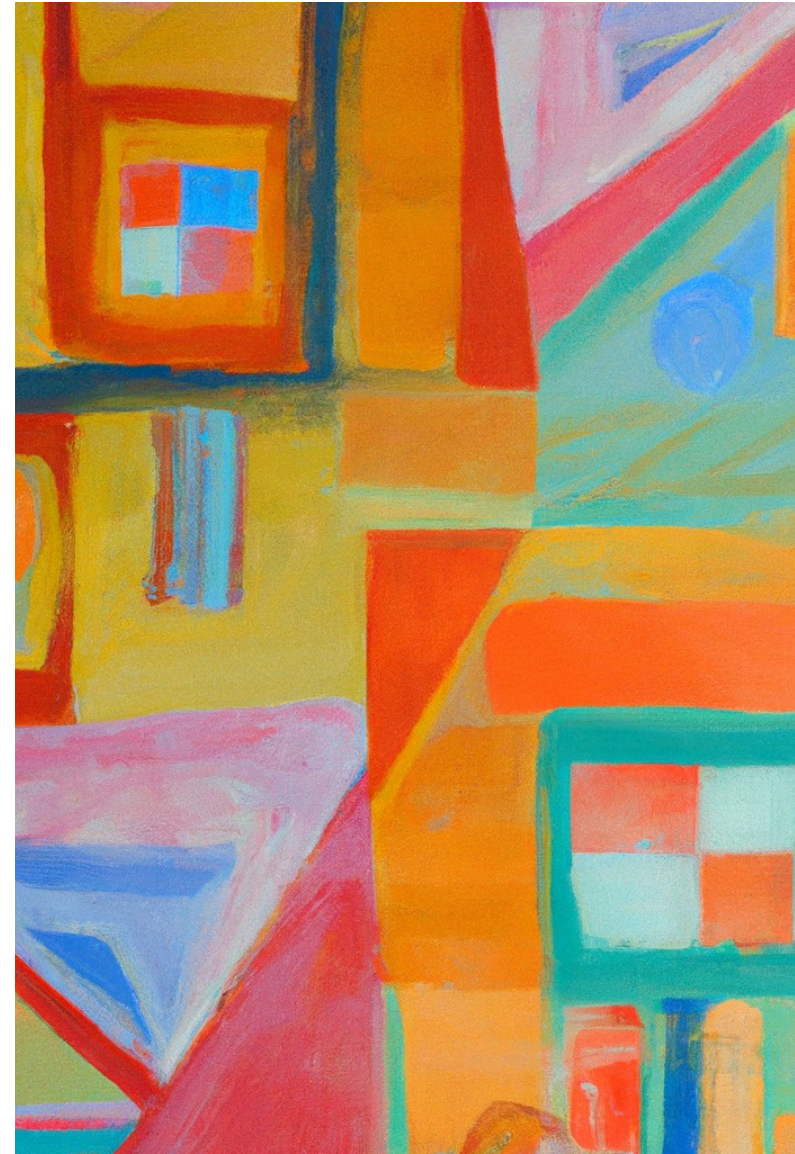
“He [Kant] fails, almost grotesquely, to show that there would be any contradiction, any logical impossibility, in the adoption by all rational beings of the most outrageously immoral rules of conduct. All he shows is that the **consequence** of their universal adoption would be such as no one would choose to incur.”



# WHY NOT CONSEQUENTIALISM?

Why does Kant make the morality of an action depend on its maxim rather than its consequences?

- The morality of our actions should depend on what is entirely within our control. [lectures 5-6]
- We can't guarantee the consequences of our actions.
- But we can control which maxims govern our actions because we decide what we intend to do.



## MORE EXAMPLES

### **Should I cheat on this LSAT exam?**

If everybody did, then entrance exams wouldn't be a criterion for selection.

### **Should I murder my competitor to get the job?**

If everybody did this, the best candidates wouldn't get jobs and so the old selection process would be changed to make this impossible.



# RATIONALITY AND MORALITY

**Kant says moral duty is based on reason.**

If we ignore or disobey our duty, we are acting contrary to reason.

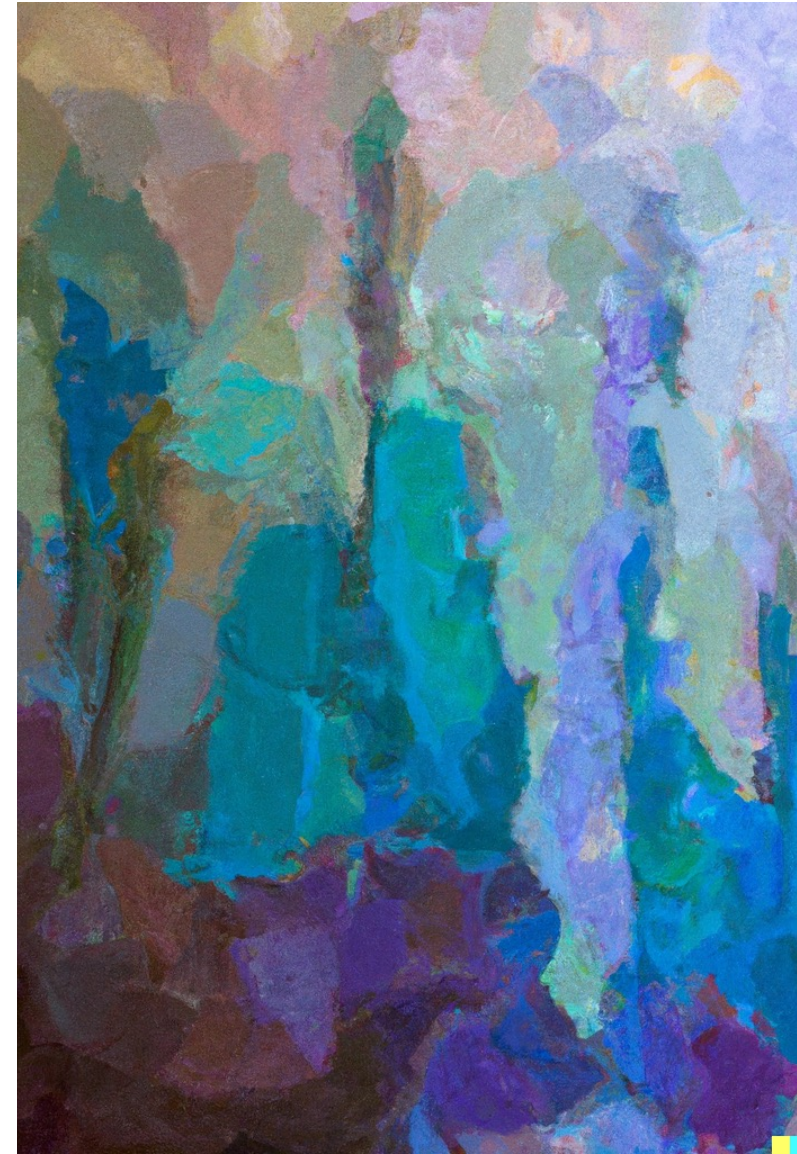
If we act immorally, we act irrationally.

If we act morally, we act rationally.



# THE RATIONALITY OF MORALITY

1. If you are rational, then you are consistent.
2. If you are consistent, then you obey the principle of universalizability.
3. If you obey the principle of universalizability, then you act morally.
4. Therefore, if you are rational, then you act morally.
5. Therefore, if you act immorally, then you are irrational.



# DIVINE AUTHORITY?

**Does morality depend on God?**

Kant says: No!

**Why?**

We can always ask, “Why should we obey God’s authority?”

The answer cannot be, “Because we ought to do what God requires of us.”

**Why not?**

Because it would be viciously circular.



# THE AUTHORITY OF REASON

- Moral requirements do not derive their force from any external authority.
- So, they must somehow **carry their force with them**.
- When we ask, “Why should I obey God?” or “Why should I obey the government?” or “Why should I act on this desire?”, the authority we are questioning would be vindicated by the production of a sufficient reason.
- This indicates that **reasons are what have authority**.

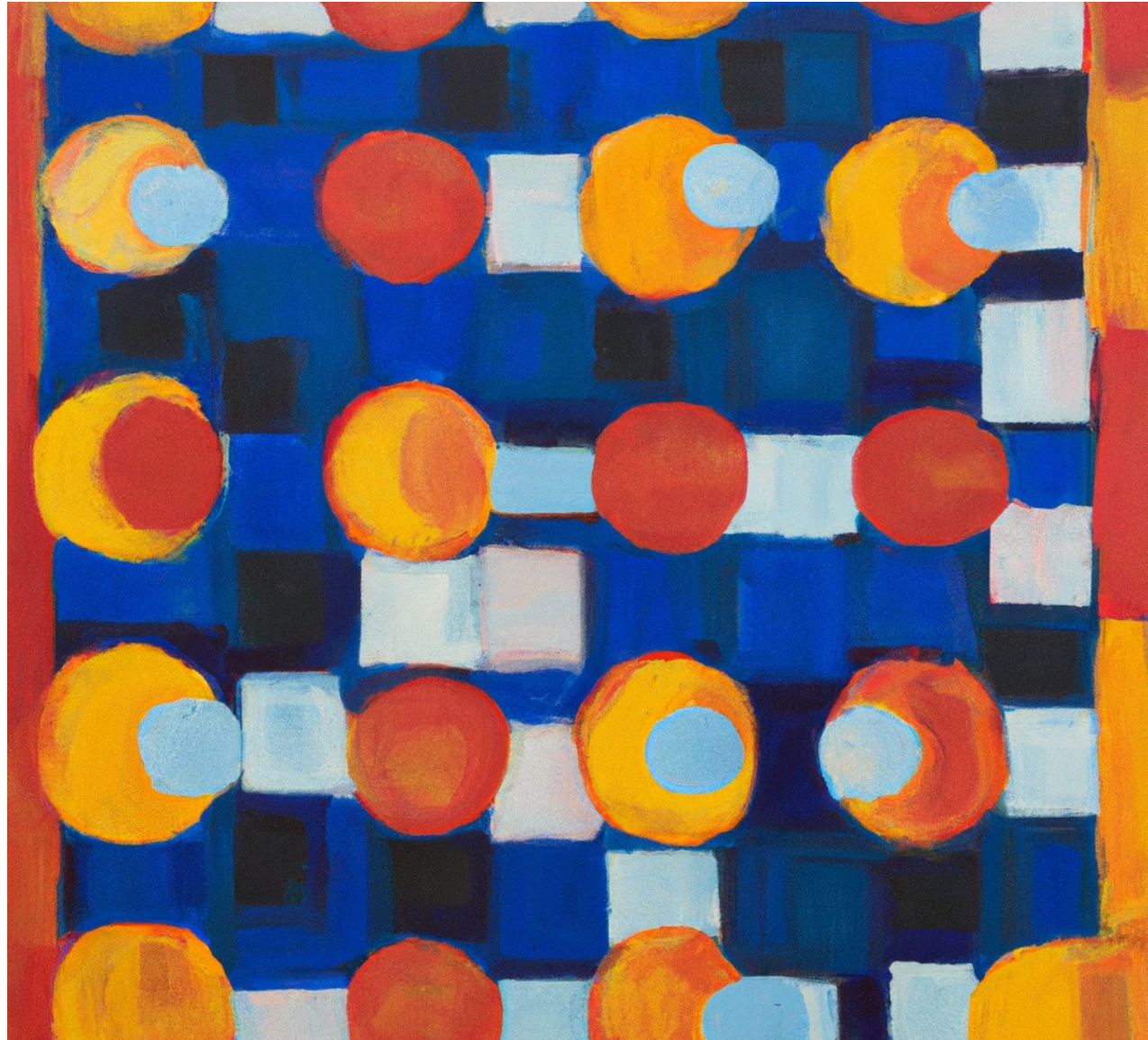




THE CATEGORICAL  
IMPERATIVE:

A SECOND  
FORMULATION

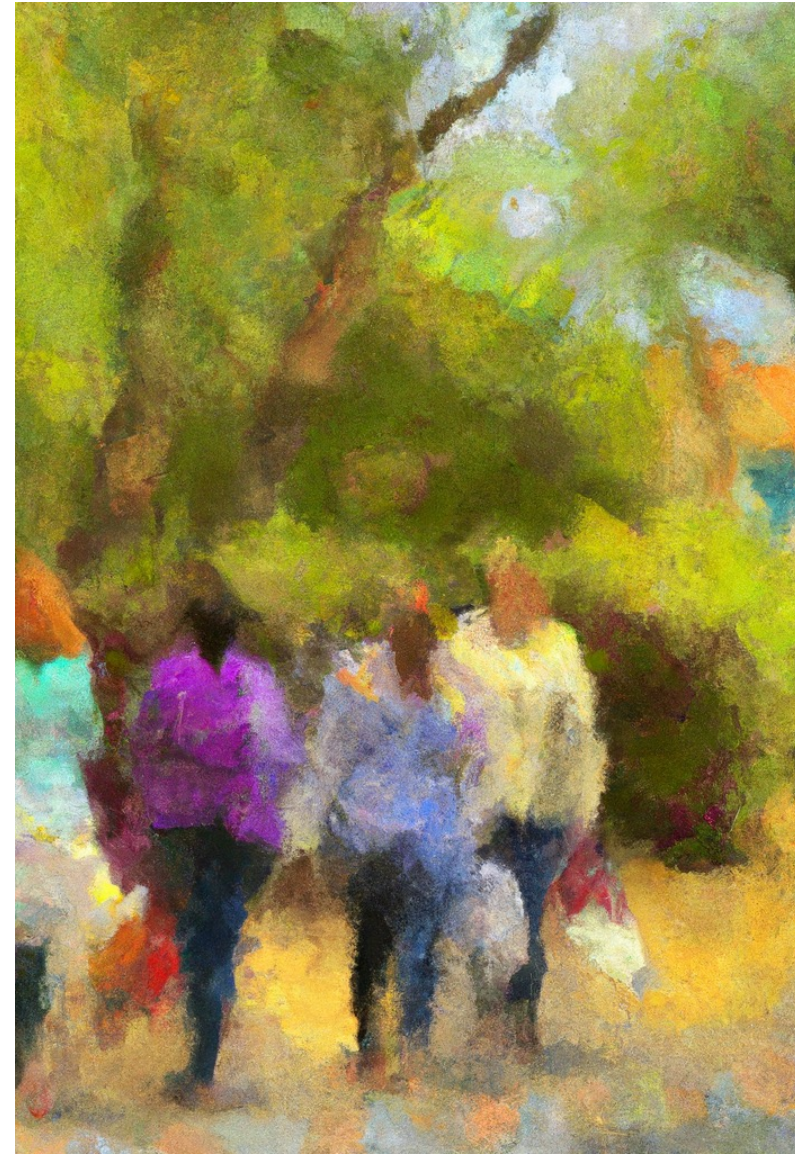
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# THE HUMANITY FORMULA

(OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE)

“Act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.”



# TWO DUTIES?

## Duty of Justice

Do not treat people as mere means.

- To use someone as a mere means is to use them in a way that they could not in principle consent.
- E.g. Lying; coercion; violence.

## Duty of Beneficence

Treat people as ends in themselves.

- Treating others with respect.
- Humans have “an intrinsic worth” or “dignity.”
- They have intrinsic worth bc they are rational agents with autonomy.



# TREATING OTHERS AS A MEANS

**Do we treat taxi drivers as 'a means' to our end?**

If not, why not?

**Answer:**

The taxi driver *consents* to the exchange.



# FALSE PROMISES (AGAIN)

Apply the Humanity Formula to false promising.

## What would Kant say?

- By making a false promise to another we make use of another human merely as a means.
- If you tell your friend the truth about being unable to pay back the money, she can make up her own mind and, if she gives you the money, she chooses to make that purpose her own.



# “TRADING UP” IN RELATIONSHIPS

You ditch your old partner for someone “better.”

**Do you treat them merely as a means to your end?**

What about casual relationships? Is it more acceptable?



# SUMMARY

Acting in accordance with duty vs. from duty.

- Morally worthy actions are done from duty.

Kant outlines the fundamental principle of morality.

- The fundamental principle of our moral duties is a categorical imperative.

Rationality is the basis for morality.

- Not happiness, pleasure, desire, etc.

Foot rejects the view that morality is based on categorical imperatives.

- She thinks they are mysterious and unnecessary.

