Kantianism

- By Immanuel Kant (18th century German philosopher)
- He believed that the only thing that is good without qualification is good will – should use your reason to cultivate good will
  - He believed that our will should be grounded in universal moral rules – i.e. unconditional rules that apply to everyone in all situations (categorical imperative)
  - Contrast this to a hypothetical imperative: describes the means to a certain end (e.g. “IF I want to pass the exam, THEN I need to study”)
- Two formulations of the categorical imperative below:
  - First formulation (1F): Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time wish that it should become a universal law
  - You should act according to moral rules you can imagine everyone else following (as a duty) without contradiction
  - E.g. under this imperative, lying would be wrong. Why?
  - If everyone lies, who do you trust? There is a contradiction here. If lying was universally acceptable, then no one would believe anyone and truths would be assumed to be lies, thus contradicting the reliability of language

- Second formulation (2F): act in a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never as a means to an end, but always as an end in itself.
  - You should never use someone to achieve an end but you should always respect others (and yourself) as autonomous, rational beings
  - E.g. Theft is wrong because you are treating the owner of the stolen thing as a means to an end (i.e. you are having the stolen thing)

- Under Kantian ethics, we must ask ourselves two questions:
  - Can I rationally wish that everyone act as I propose to act? (1F)
  - Does my action respect the people involved rather than using them for my own purposes? (2F)
- Kantian ethics are deontological (or non-consequentialist) ethics – they judge an action based on properties inherent to the action itself rather than on the outcomes of the actions
- Motivation is extremely important in determining a person’s moral worth
- Kant argued that one can have moral worth only if they are motivated by morality
• So, for example, being generous only to feel good about oneself is not morally worthy, according to Kant. Instead, being generous because it is one’s duty is how one earns moral worth.

• Strengths of Kantianism:
  - Provides universal ethical guidelines (that also work across time)
  - Gives all people moral worth (considers them as rational, autonomous beings)
  - Handles moral luck well
  - Treats all people as equal

• Weaknesses:
  - Sometimes no single ethical rule completely characterizes a situation
  - Kantianism allows no flexibility or bending of the rules
  - Could have good motivation but poor judgement of the outcome