

“Should I, or Shouldn’t I?”

Self-Governance Through Principle-Based Reasoning

An Enlightenment Principle-Based Decision-Making Technique Used
by 18th Century Americans

This lesson gives students a reliable reasoning tool with which they can govern their own behavior, assess the behavior of others, and examine laws and rules. Simultaneously, use of this technique will give them insight into the reasoning approach of educated 18th Century Americans – how and why they made many of the decisions they did.

GRADES	4 th , 5 th
TIME	1 class period
SUBJECTS	History, Civics, Language Arts, Science, Character/SEL
STRATEGIES	Class participation, video, writing
TAGS	principle-based reasoning, Immanuel Kant, Test of the Universal Law, Enlightenment, logic, character development, self-governance
CONNECTED LESSONS	Development of 18th Century Alter Ego Journaling Science Leads the Way and Creates a Nation Constitutional Debates Creation of Classroom Laws

Though usable at any time, the lesson fits tightly into Social Studies as students are learning about the American revolutionary period, providing knowledge of historic context and a tool and habit of self-regulation (civics). It also provides an important assessment tool for study of the Constitution and Bill of Rights

Overview

Educated 18th Century Americans, using a principle-based decision-making technique, created a nation with a unique form of government based largely on civic ideals and principles.

By learning the technique, students realize why it is essential to have laws, rules, and personal values that are good for not just oneself but also for the community, the nation, and the world. Once the lesson is completed, students apply the technique as a class whenever someone's actions are remarkably good or bad. Through consistent use of the technique, students create a reasoning habit that is important to good citizenship. An extension exercise goes into applying the test to actions that are more complex.

Objectives

Students will:

- Know that Immanuel Kant's decision-making test used what was seen in the 18th Century as scientific reasoning to make decisions about whether any act would be good or bad.

His test is based on the principle that actions that would be for the good of society are good and desirable. His test, the Test of Universal Law, is "Will this act, if it is universally the law that this act would be done by everyone in the same situation, have a good or bad effect upon society?"

- Understand how to use the technique to make principle-based decisions for themselves.

This technique was learned by most educated colonists in the Revolutionary and Founding periods. Many used it in their pursuit of a virtuous life, and it is useful in the formulation of just laws. (When used as part of the Why America Is Free program, students will also eventually use this reasoning technique to assess elements of the Constitution and make laws for their classroom.)

- Understand when and how to apply the test. They will habitually use the test to help decide whether to do something and to assess the actions of others.

Glossary

Enlightenment European historical period and movement in the 17th and 18th century when people realized that they could use the logical reasoning that had been introduced by the Scientific Revolution to solve problems in government and society.

Means to an End An act that on its face appears to be the result of one moral choice but has a hidden moral choice as well; Example: Doing a kindness to someone not only because you want to help them but also to look good to others.

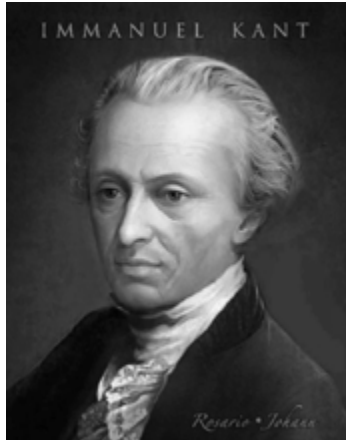
Moral Choice	A decision about an act that involves the issue of right/good and wrong/evil; a decision about an act that if done by everyone would have a good or bad effect on society.
Self-governance	Self-control; governing oneself; living and making decisions consistently that comply with personally held principles or a code of behavior.
Scientific Revolution	The drastic change in scientific thought that took place during the 16th and 17th centuries when, rather than just accepting things they had been told that made no sense to them, scientists began using logical reasoning, experimentation, and observations to understand the world.
Society	A group of people involved with each other through persistent relations, or a large social group, usually living in the same general area or country and typically subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations. Ex: "American society" Universal – pertaining to the whole world; pertaining to everyone everywhere.
Universal	Pertaining to the whole world; pertaining to everyone everywhere.

Background: Introducing Kant's Test of the Universal Law

A world-altering revolution in thinking and ideas about government were essential elements that led to the American Revolution and the US Constitution. This lesson explains the belief that man could reason through and solve both the mysteries of the physical world (Scientific Revolution) and the problems in society (Enlightenment).

As the scientific revolution evolved, people realized that many of the reasoning techniques that scientists were using to solve the mysteries and problems in the physical world – logic and other aspects of the scientific method – could be used to solve the problems in other areas. The social scientists of the time, the individuals active in finding answers to human and social problems through the scientific method and logical thought, were called "philosophes," or "natural philosophers." These intellectuals believed that there must be a way to figure out if actions, laws, and policies are right or wrong, good or evil, by applying some logical, scientific test. For centuries most people in Europe had been discouraged from thinking about such things; the kings, priests, and others in power had made such decisions and everyone else was expected to live according to the rules the powerful set out without questioning them.

In the 18th century, America was greatly influenced by the writings and teachings of the European “philosophes” of the day, the social scientists (philosophers) of the Enlightenment. A substantial number of the Scottish philosophers and intellectuals had immigrated to America because throughout Europe it was well accepted that only in America could the new solutions to social and government problems be put into practice. Europeans recognized this fact because, unlike Europe, America had vast land, resources, and most importantly it was still “young.” American society, worldview, and government were still new, allowed great freedom, and were still malleable.



One of the Enlightenment influences with enormous impact on the thinking and actions of the colonists was the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

People cannot live well in society if they do not learn to govern themselves (self-governance). But even if a person wants very much to do only good, governing one's own behavior is harder if you are not even sure whether an act you are considering is right or wrong. Immanuel Kant, a German Enlightenment philosopher, believed that people could and should be able to figure out if an act is right and wrong by using one scientific, logical test. He created a test that worked to tell if many actions were good or bad, right or wrong. His test, The Test of Universal Law, is really very simple, and its very name is a big hint as to how it works. Universal means everyone everywhere.

The Lesson

Explain the background in your own words.

Read the following aloud and discuss.

Kant's Test of Universal Law

Kant said that if something is a morally good action, it would be good for society if everyone did it. In other words, if it became a Universal Law that everyone must make the same decision in the same circumstances, the result would have to be good for society if the action is truly morally good. “Good for society” means it helps people live together happily, peacefully, fairly, and productively. A morally bad action would be one that would be bad for society if everyone did it in the same circumstances. An action that would have no impact on society if it were universal would not involve morality (right and wrong). He called the choices that can have a good or bad impact on society if done by everyone “moral choices.” Some moral choices are more complex than others.

Moral Choice – a decision that involves the issue of right/good and wrong/evil; a decision about an action that if done by everyone would have a good or bad effect on society. Among moral choices, some are clear, but others are complex, involving secondary and often very different moral choices.

Exercise 1: Learning How to Use Kant’s Test of the Universal Law

Walk around the room. Mentally select some possession of a student that all students will recognize as something you have no right to confiscate. Ideally, pick something other students probably like and want. Walk up to the student who has it. Tell her/him you like it. Take it, and walk back to the front of the room, either keeping it on you or putting it in your desk, saying you like it so much you will keep it.

Wait for the shoe to drop. When either the stunned silence extends too long or a student objects, then say: “What did I do?” (I took someone else’s item just because I wanted it.) “Now apply Kant’s Law: What would happen to society if it was universally the law that everyone would do the same thing, just taking things if they wanted it?”

Help students use these reasoning steps and discuss:

1. Is the decision to steal in this situation a moral choice or a non-moral choice?
Would stealing in this situation have an impact on society if everyone did it?
Since stealing can have an impact on society if everyone does it, it is a moral choice.
2. What would the effect on society be?
As a class, the students will apply deductive reasoning. If they choose to steal and it becomes a universal law causing everyone to steal, what will happen to society?
As a class they deduce that if everyone stole no one would be able to count on having anything of his very own. Pets, hard-earned cash, clothing, precious gifts, home ...nothing would be safe.
They deduce as scientists that they would not want to leave home for fear everything would be gone when they returned.
3. Would this effect be bad for society or good for society? (bad)
4. What is the better choice? (Not stealing)
Discuss why this is so. What would the effect on society be if everyone were honest? Do our laws today reflect that finding by prohibiting stealing?
As a class they decide that if everyone could be trusted, they would never again have to worry about locking their houses or cars, setting alarms, leaving homework on the desk and much more.

Exercise 2: Applying Kant's Test of the Universal Law to Many Actions

Materials

Container, strips of paper on which is printed each of the acts listed below

Preparation

Print the list.

Cut the paper into strips, each of which contains one of the acts listed.

Place slips of paper on which is typed one act from the list below.

Students draw slips either individually or in groups. The student will read it aloud and then the student or group or the class will identify it as a non-moral choice or a moral choice. Use as many as needed.

Step 1 Determine whether an act is moral or nonmoral by applying the test. If the slip of paper has written on it a moral choice, they will need to apply Kant's Test of Universal Law.

If it contains a non-moral choice, there will be no further examination.

If I do (whatever is being considered) and it becomes universal law so that everyone then does the same thing in the same circumstance, what effect will it have on society?

Step 2 If the act is one either morally good or bad, determine if the effect would be good or bad if everyone did it.

Would or would not want this action to be something universally done? If the choice is one that they decide would cause harm to society if made by everyone, have them come up with a better choice.

As they conclude what would be the better moral choice, have them consider why they think this choice would be better for society and if it would make them feel better about themselves.

Many times, it takes courage to do the right thing.

This decision-making exercise is the same one many of the people who created our Constitution and form of our government learned and used.

List of Actions

Steal

Share your lunch with someone who forgot his

Eat vegetables on your plate in a specific order

Lie

Enter the second entrance to of a building rather than the first.

Cheat on test

Stand up for someone who is being bullied

Sleep with just a sheet over you rather than a blanket and a sheet

Protect someone from a dog

Cheat at sports

Sing in the shower when it doesn't bother anyone or slow you down

Hurt someone intentionally

Help others accomplish good things

Make a mess and leave it for someone else to deal with

Take more than your share of something

Without telling anyone before or after, clean trash from the sidewalk

Hurt an animal

Destroy someone else's property

Destroy or damage something of your own that will have to be repaired or replaced at the expense of someone else's time and/or money

Ridicule someone

Admit a misdeed or mistake

Intentionally be late to a meal at which you are expected

Be late yourself in situations that inconvenience or delay others

Break a promise

Compliment someone for something you admire though you will never see them again

When you find a wallet and you know whose it is, return it to him just as you found it

Return something borrowed late

Return something borrowed in damaged condition

Allow yourself to “forget” to return something borrowed

Deny doing something to escape responsibility for something you did

Blame someone else for something you did.

Help all injured or sick people you come across

Help only those injured or sick people who are your friends, leaving the others

Tell others bad things about someone because you don't like the person, not because that person poses a threat to anyone

Lie to make yourself look good or impressive to others

Exaggerate to make a story better, but do so in a way that lets everyone know you are not telling the truth (like saying you swallowed so much helium that you floated to the ceiling)

Lie to take credit for something good that should go to someone else

Lie to take the blame for something bad that you didn't do

Exercise 3: Use Kant's Test of the Universal Law to Create a Personal Code of Conduct

Materials

One small spiral notebook per student

Explain to students in your own words:

Throughout the 18th Century in America a compass by which one could know the direction one was traveling even in roadless woods and mountains was a prized tool. American colonists saw life itself as a journey. They knew that moral decisions they made determined which way they traveled, or in other words, the way they lived their lives and the quality of character they developed.

Because applying Kant's test helped them find rules that were good not just for themselves but also for all, the collection of these rules was often called their Moral Compass. It showed them the way to go when they came to decision-points in the journey of their lives, just like a compass indicates direction.

As you decide upon what actions are morally right by using Kant's test, you can create a book of these decisions, your personal Moral Compass.

Allow each student to make a book.

On the first inside page, write Kant's Universal Law.

On the following pages, have each student write the moral choices discussed that each wants to guide them.

From this point forward, have them to add to these books when the opportunity arises. This selection of principles will become the values that will become their moral compass in life.

Continued Application of Kant's Law to Create a Habit

At least several times a week through the remainder of the year, whenever a student does something notably good or wrong, as a group apply Kant's Law.

Extension: More Complex Application of Kant's Law – When Motive Counts

Some actions are not clearly as good or as bad as they first seem to be. For these you may have to look carefully at not just the act but also the reasons someone does something. The example below demonstrates this.

If the action is a means to an end, discuss as a class the surface moral choice.

Is it good or bad according to the Test of Universal Law? Then discuss the hidden, real choice that is included. Is it good or bad according to the Test of Universal Law?

If one choice is good and the other is bad, compare their worth and discuss. Explore whether there is a way that avoids making any bad moral choices. For example:

There is a new boy in school in your class who is having a hard time meeting anyone. You discover that his older brother is already the star of the high school basketball team, and you would really like to meet him. You really have no desire to make the new classmate into a friend, but you act welcoming to this boy and include him in your group of friends so that you might eventually get to meet his brother.

Applying Kant's Test to Complex Acts

- Step 1 What is the surface choice? Apply the Test of Universal Law. Is the act good, bad, or neither?
- Step 2 What hidden motive was included in this choice?

Step 3 As the situation is explained, would you be deceiving and using him just to meet his brother? Apply the test of Universal Law. Is the act good, bad, or neither?

Step 4 How would you feel if you found out that the reason someone was nice to you was only because they wanted to meet your older brother?

Step 5 Find a way to avoid making any morally bad choice if you can. The better moral choice would be what? Options include:

Be friendly to him sincerely, but also tell him from the beginning that you would like to meet his brother if he is willing to introduce you

Be welcoming and friendly sincerely, but do not use him to meet his brother

Avoid him

Use the same steps to discuss these actions that need more complex use of Kant's Test of the Universal Law:

List of Complex Actions

Act friendly to a new student while the teacher sees you to impress her, but ignore the student when the teacher is not looking

Lie to protect someone from someone bad who will harm that person

Engage someone who could be a danger to you or others in a conversation to keep him busy while people to whom you are loyal get away

Be very honest in word and action, even when you know that as a direct result of your doing so, your family may be harmed though they are innocent and not involved at all

Lie in word and surface actions, making it look like you agree with someone when in fact you strongly disagree with him to protect yourself and your family from danger

Tell others bad things about someone even though you are not sure how true they are because if they are true that person is a danger to the people you are telling