

# KANTIAN DEONTOLOGY

## A. What is Deontology?

1. Deontological approaches in ethics usually contrasted with *teleological* approaches.
2. A *teleological* theory is goal oriented:
  - a morally *right* act is one that brings about *goodness*
  - *egoism*: a right act brings about good for the self
  - *utilitarianism*: right act brings about overall good
3. Deontological theories are not goal oriented:
  - rightness or wrongness of an act *not* explained in terms of its consequences, but its own features.

# KANTIAN DEONTOLOGY

4. Most famous form of deontology comes from the work of Immanuel Kant



**Immanuel Kant**  
(1724-1804)



## B. Kant's Rationalism

1. Kant poses the question of what the fundamental source of morality is, or:

*What is it about people's actions that make them susceptible to evaluation as right or wrong?*

2. The following are *not* classified as right or wrong:

- actions of plants or inanimate objects
- actions performed by animals out of instinct
- actions performed by humans involuntarily

3. Kant's conclusion: the source of morality is:

- our ability to *rationally* make decisions
- our possession of a "will" (in the sense of free will)



## B. Kant's Rationalism

4. Morality applies to all rational beings...  
... so its source cannot be pleasure or desire.

(a) Morality would apply to non-emotional beings like Vulcans even though they cannot experience pleasure

(b) Rational beings with superstrong emotions would not have a higher moral status than us.

5. Kant concluded that nothing besides rationality can dictate what the rules of morality are.



## B. Kant on Goodness

1. ***Moral*** or ***ethical*** goodness different from other kinds of goodness

- A good basketball shoe is well-made, ergonomically designed and helps its wearer run and jump better.
- A good umbrella is large but easy to carry and does a good job keeping rain away from someone.
- This is not *moral* goodness.

2. Other kinds of goodness dependent on needs or desires: moral goodness is not.

3. Only thing that is morally good is a *good will*.



## B. Kant on Goodness

4. Kant believes that an act *has no moral worth* if it is not performed for the sake of morality alone.

Example: Two merchants:

- one doesn't cheat his customers because it's the right thing to do.
- the other doesn't cheat his customers because it is bad for business in the long run.

5. The actions are both in accordance with duty , but only the first is done for the sake of duty

6. Kant thinks an act must be done for the sake of duty to have moral value. What do you think?



### C. Maxims

1. Capacity for rational choice cornerstone of morality.
2. Making a choice rationally involves:
  - having an awareness of the situation you are in
  - deliberating about your possible choices
  - selecting one of those choices as the right one.
3. Takes the form of **self-governance** or **self-legislation**:
  - we apply principles or rules to ourselves as to how we shall act.
4. Kant calls these principles or rules “**maxims**”.



### C. Maxims

5. Example: I borrow money from a friend, promising to back it back, but knowing I won't be able to.
  - \* I have in effect imposed this rule or maxim on myself:  
“Whenever I am in need of money, and want to borrow it from a friend, I shall promise to pay it back even when I know I will not be able to.”
6. For Kant, morality boils down to these issues:
  - what sorts of maxims should I utilize when making moral decisions?
  - what sorts of maxims should I avoid?



## D. Imperatives

1. Kant understands what one *ought to* or *should* do in terms of imperatives or commands. Two kinds:

2. A ***hypothetical imperative*** tells us what we should or must do something in order to achieve some desired end or result.

If you want to become a good violin player, then *practice every day*.

If you want lots of happiness, then *find a way to make lots of money*.

These are not important for morality.



## D. Imperatives

3. A ***categorical imperative*** tells us something that we must or should do, not for the sake of some end or goal, but simply in virtue of rationality.

4. Kant thinks there is only one categorical imperative.  
- However, he thinks that it can be formulated in three different ways.

5. We're going to focus on the most famous formulation.  
- Others in your book on pp. 207-213.



## E. The Categorical Imperative

1. Kant words it this way (p. 205 in your book):

*Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*

2. This still needs a lot of spelling out.

- a) Every voluntary or deliberate act the rest of adopting a maxim
- b) To determine whether or not an act is right, we must consider what *would* happen if everyone always acted on that maxim
- c) Question: is it possible for to will the maxim to be a universal law?



## E. The Categorical Imperative

3. Two ways it might not be possible:

- (a) It might be impossible or incoherent to even imagine everyone acting on it.
- (b) It might be be inconsistent or in conflict with certain other things that we must also will to be to a universal law.

4. Kant's moral theory:

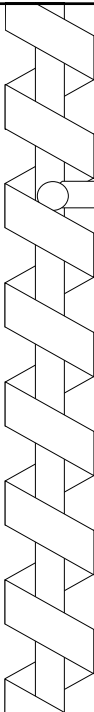
**(CI1)** An act token X performed by person P at time T is morally right if and only if the maxim M that P invokes at time T in performing X is such that P could consistently will that M become a universal law.



## F. Some Examples

1. Kant gives four examples of the categorical imperative in action. Some are difficult to follow.
2. Let's start with making a promise to pay someone back when you have no intention of doing so.
3. The maxim of my action is:

Whenever I need money, and want to borrow it from someone, but know I cannot pay it back, I shall promise to pay it back anyway.



## F. Some Examples

4. According to Kant, I must then consider the "universal" form of the maxim:

Whenever anyone needs money, and wants to borrow it from someone, but knows (s)he cannot pay it back, (s)he should promise to pay it back anyway.

5. Kant says it is incoherent to imagine this becoming a universal law.

- If no one paid back borrowed money, the very practice of promising and lending would cease to exist.

## F. Some Examples

6. One could give a similar rationale as for why it is morally wrong to cheat on your taxes, etc.

7. Does fairly well with the cases in which utilitarianism goes wrong.

8. Doesn't require your act to actually make or inspire anyone to act the same as you.

- The issue isn't about whether your maxim will become a universal law, but what the result would be if it did.

## G. Objections to Kant's Ethics

1. An objection against Kant's theory of moral worth:

**Consider Vicki the volunteer:** (Vicki volunteers mostly because she enjoys it.) An argument:

**(P1)** If an act must be done for the sake of duty to have moral worth, then Vicki's acts of volunteering do not have moral worth.

**(P2)** Vicki's acts of volunteering do have moral worth.

**(C)** Therefore, it is not the case that an act must be done for the sake of duty to have moral worth.



## G. Objections to Kant's Ethics



Fred Feldman

2. Some objections to the categorical imperative from Fred Feldman:

Recall the following:

**(CI1)** An act token X performed by person P at time T is morally right if and only if the maxim M that P invokes at time T in performing X is such that P could consistently will that M become a universal law.

## G. Objections to Kant's Ethics

3. **Ivan the investor:** Ivan decides beforehand that he will take all his money out from the bank when the Dow average reaches 10,000

Notice that it is impossible to will that this become a universal law because banks would run out of money and the economy would collapse

**(P1)** If (CI1) is correct, then Ivan's act of taking his money out of the bank is morally wrong.

**(P2)** Ivan's act of taking his money out of the bank is not morally wrong.

**(C)** Therefore, (CI1) is not correct.

## G. Objections to Kant's Ethics

4. Perhaps the biggest problem for (CI1) is what I shall call "*the problem of gerrymandered maxims*"

- For (CI1) whether an act is right or wrong depends on the maxim that P invokes when performing X
- Consider **Ralph and Ronnie**, both of whom falsely promise their friend Regina that they will pay her back the \$100 that each borrows from her, when they have no intention of doing so.
- 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."

## G. Objections to Kant's Ethics

- Ronnie, however, acts on the maxim: "Whenever I need money, and it's between 12:48 and :12:49pm on a Wednesday, and I weigh exactly 137 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."

**(P1)** If (CI1) is true, then Ralph's false promise is morally wrong while Ronnie's false promise is morally right.

**(P2)** It is not the case that Ralph's false promise is morally wrong while Ronnie's false promise is morally right.

**(C)** Therefore, (CI1) is not true.

## G. Objections to Kant's Ethics

### 5. One possible response:

- Perhaps it's not merely a matter of what we tell ourselves when we act.
- There is something like the "real reason" or "real motivation" we have when we act a certain way.
- Not up to us to gerrymander it.

### 6. Raises issues about the psychology of making choices:

### 7. Another possible response:

- Put a restriction in what maxims "count" in C11  
E.g., limit it to those that are not specific.

## G. Objections to Kant's Ethics

8. Kant's ethics has *some* similarities with the Golden rule, and maybe the same problems as well.

**Pete the Pervert Redux:** Pete tells himself every morning to go out and grope the first person he sees.

**(P1)** If (C11) is true, then Pete the Pervert's acts of groping the first person he sees every morning are not morally wrong.

**(P2)** Pete the Pervert's acts of groping the first person he sees every morning are morally wrong.

**(C)** (C11) is not true.