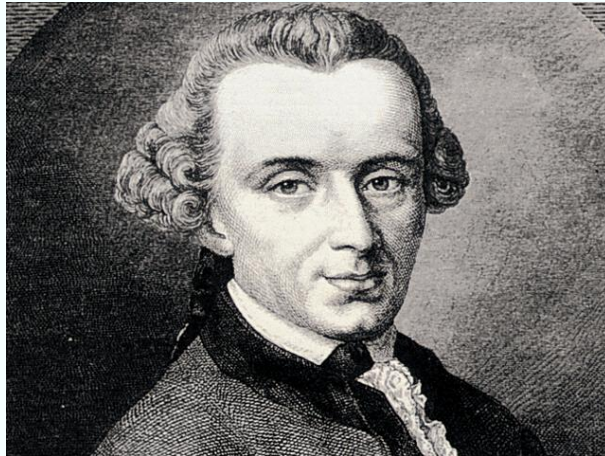


Deontology

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Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)



schriftman.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/immanu...

Kant believed that morality is a system of *categorical imperatives*

A categorical imperative is an absolute rule, a rule that binds us irrespective of our desires or any other consideration

We are truly moral agents, according to Kant, only when we act *out of reverence* for the moral law; i.e. only when we obey the categorical imperative

If we act for any other reason we are not acting morally (even if our act is identical to the one we would have performed if we were acting out of reverence for the law)

But what are categorical imperatives?

An imperative is a 'should' or 'must' statement:

- **'you should do this'**
- **'I must do that'**

Here is an imperative of the sort you act on daily:

I want to get to London by noon

I believe that I can only get to London by noon if I catch the 10.30 am train

I must, therefore, catch the 10.30 am train

This, though, is a *hypothetical* imperative

Your being rationally bound by this imperative depends on your having the desire and the belief that function as premises

A categorical imperative is different

A categorical imperative binds you in virtue of your rational nature

Your desires become irrelevant

Here is a categorical imperative:

I believe it is right to do A

Therefore I should do A

Here the imperative comes straight from the belief, no desire is needed

**You probably immediately think – but
there is a premise missing**

What about '*I want to do the right thing*'?

Kant would say that if you think this you haven't properly understood the moral concept 'right'

To say that in order to do the right thing you must *want* to do the right thing implies that you will only do something you recognise to be right if you *want* to do that thing

The thing about morality is that it requires us to act *whatever* we want

Ok, so that's what a categorical imperative is

A rule that rationally binds us irrespective of our desires

At least that is the *form* of a categorical imperative

But what is its *content*?

Kant offered several formulations the 'categorical imperative', all supposedly equivalent. Here are two:

The principle of humanity: always treat humanity whether in yourself or in another, as an end (in themselves), never solely as a means.

It is always wrong, according to Kant, to use others as nothing more than tools by which to achieve your own ends.

The principle of universalisability: Act only on that maxim you could will to be universal law.

Kant argues that before we act for a given reason we should always ask ourselves 'what if everyone were to do this?'

Note that Kant does not seem to think that the absolute moral rules that bind us are the ones we are taught as small children 'don't lie', 'keep promises' etc., the account he gives of the moral law is far more sophisticated.

There are other deontologists who believe that the rules that bind us absolutely are, for example, the ten commandments, or some other list of 'lower order' rules.

For Kant the moral law binds us absolutely in virtue of our capacity for reason: to act immorally is to act irrationally

Here are some considerations that might prompt you to accept deontology:

- A doctor saves the lives of seven of his dying patients by gently killing a healthy tramp and using his organs for the transplants his patients need.**
- A government official, desperate to avert a food crisis and believing the fear of genetically modified food to be overblown, orders his underlings to remove the labels and distribute GM food as non-GM.**
- A father of two daughters, believing the family will starve if they have to pay another dowry, forces his unwilling wife to abort a pregnancy when he discovers it is another daughter.**

Problems for Deontology:

- *How do we know which actions are intrinsically right or wrong?*
- *Are there any actions that are intrinsically right or wrong?*
- *How could blindly following a set of rules make us moral?*
- *Do rules like 'do as you would be done by' provide any guidance on action?*
- *Aren't there sometimes moral reasons for breaking moral rules?*

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