

Philosophical frameworks. Kant's deontology.

Kant: How humans stand out from “beasts”

Humans have intrinsic worth because they are reasoning beings that assign value to things and use reason to pursue goals.

Humans have the capacity to act according to principles (reason-based) instead of acting on impulse or emotion.



Kant was a philosopher in the early 1800s. He was a devout Christian in Europe. He believed that human beings stood out as something quite different from all other animal life. In particular, they had intrinsic value. Not only did they happen to find certain things more valuable than others, but they assigned value because they were a rational being. Because they assigned value, that gave them intrinsic worth. So this is one of the two stand out features of human beings.

The other one was that human beings were rational. And because they were irrational, they were able to identify principles and act according to those principles. Instead of merely acting on impulse or emotion, which he saw as more hardwired, we were able to take a step back, think rationally, identify the proper way to act, the proper rules, and then act accordingly.

Kant's Categorical Imperative



FIRST VERSION

"Always act so that you can will that your maxim become a universal law."

(Always act by following rules that you could will that everyone always follow, while at the same time assuming a veil of ignorance concerning your own lot in life.)

Kant used these two features of human beings to develop a theory of morality which he called the categorical imperative. He had two versions of this theory, and they actually sound like two completely different theories of morality. But he argued that one could be derived from the other, and so really, the two seemingly different accounts of morality were one and the same. He called them the first version of the categorical imperative and the second version of the categorical imperative.

So let's start with the first. In translation from the German, the first version says, always act so that you can will that your maxim become a universal law. What that means, really, is always follow rules that you could sincerely wish everyone follow, even if you didn't know or pretended not to know what particular lot in life you were going to live.

Version 1 Examples

Should you lie to Grandma about what you plan to do with her farm when she dies?

- Can you will that everyone lie to help achieve their personal goals? No! Therefore, **"Lying is permissible"** is not a rule you can follow to authorize lying to Grandma.

Should you have an affair with woman you feel very attracted to given that your own spouse and you are not getting along?

- Can you will that everyone commit adultery when their marriage is struggling? No! Therefore, **"Committing adultery is permissible"** is not a rule you can follow in this circumstance.

So I'll give you some examples. Should you lie to grandma about what you plan to do with her farm when she dies? Well, let's see. What would the rule be that you'd be following if you chose to lie to grandma in that case? Perhaps it would be lying is permissible.

Now is that a rule that you could really wish everyone freely followed, even if you didn't know what lot in life you were going to be living? You could be the liar. You could be grandma. Could you sincerely wish everyone follows such a rule? Whenever they feel the impulse, they should lie. The answer is no, of course not. So therefore you can't identify lying is permissible as a general rule that can count as a principle for everyone always to follow, no matter what. And you, therefore, should not lie to grandma.

Let's take another example. Should you have an affair with a woman you feel attracted to given that your own spouse and you are not getting along? Well, what would be the rule that you'd be following? How about this? Committing adultery is permissible. Well, could you sincerely wish everyone followed that rule such that, for instance, when their marriage is struggling, they can go out and commit adultery? Well, probably not.

You're happy to allow yourself to follow that rule, but not necessarily happy too allow everyone to follow that rule. So since you don't have a nice general rule that you could sincerely wish everyone follow that would permit you to commit adultery, you, therefore, should not commit adultery.

Kant's Categorical Imperative



SECOND VERSION

"Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."

(Don't treat rational beings as if they are mere things there for you to use. Act respectfully toward reasoning beings.)

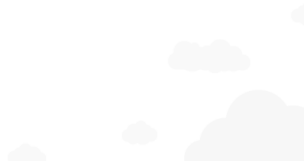
Kant had a second version of the categorical imperative. Act so that you can treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always as an end and never as a means only. What this amounted to was don't treat rational beings as if they were mere things there for your own use. In other words, if something is capable of assigning value to things, then they have intrinsic worth, and they can't be treated as a mere thing. They can't be treated as a tool the way you could treat your knife as something useful to do things with. In other words, people who are rational command a certain respect. Act respectfully toward reasoning beings.



Version 2: Lying to Grandma

Should you lie to Grandma about what you plan to do with her farm when she dies?

Lying treats not only the person you are talking to with disrespect, but even yourself. If Grandma wants to know your intentions and you answer her with a lie you are not treating her as a rational being with her own values and goals.



So going back to the same two examples, let's now apply the second version of the categorical imperative. Should you lie to grandma about what you plan to do with her farm when she dies? Well, lying treats not only the person you're talking to with disrespect, according to Kant, but it also involves treating yourself with disrespect. Your nature is such that you are pretty much hard-wired to communicate truth through your speech acts. And when you lie, you actually are undermining your own nature, which is a form of disrespect to yourself.

So is it OK for you to lie to grandma about what you plan to do with her farm when she dies? Well, you are thinking about grandma's feelings, and you don't want her to be miserable, but in fact, according to Kant, you're ultimately being disrespectful both to her and to you. And so you shouldn't do it. You should not lie. It doesn't mean you have to tell the truth. You can avoid the subject, but you should not look her squarely in the eye and pretend to be saying something true which is false. That is treating her merely as a means to your end of perhaps not wanting to hurt her feelings or creating a convenient situation for yourself or some of each. Either way, it's the wrong thing to do.

Version 2: Having an Affair

Should you have an affair with woman you feel very attracted to given that your own spouse and you are not getting along?

Committing adultery is a form of "cheating" -- it is breaking your vows while leaving your partner to think she still must live up to hers. Sex outside of marriage is also disrespectful to your sexual partner, who, without an economic arrangement, is treated merely as a tool for your own satisfaction.

Let's look at the second example. Should you have an affair with a woman you feel very attracted to given that your own spouse and you are not getting along? Well, this one, you can imagine, is going to be answered in the negative for Kant. Committing adultery is a form of cheating. It is breaking your vow while leaving your partner to think she still must live up to hers.

Simply the fact that it's breaking your vow right then and there is enough to make it wrong. By breaking your vow, you are basically being disrespectful to the person and to God, to the person who you made the vow with, but also a vow is to God. You're being disrespectful to God. That would be how Kant would see this.

Furthermore, Kant actually believed that sex outside the marriage was disrespectful to the women who you be having sex with. I think he saw this from a man's point of view, that there is no way to have sex without at least at some point in the process treating a person merely as a means to your pleasure. Once married and involved in an economics contract, this changed, since there is a sense in which each spouse and yourself owned the other. And that changed the dynamic of sex, according to Kant.

Question 1

DS760 - Philosophical Frameworks - Deontology

🔊 Question for Self Assessment: Short Answer

Evaluate the act of a car mechanic charging a client for the costly damage he did to his client's car in his effort to fix it. You may use either version of Kant's Categorical Imperative.

SUBMIT

Answer is at the end of this transcript

+ Strengths of Kant's Categorical Imperative

- The theory is grounded in the idea that we should not do something we would not want others to do.
- Using people is wrong, even when the act also brings about good consequences.
- People have certain rights simply because they are reasoning beings. Race, class and gender are irrelevant.
- Any rational person can determine the morality of an act just by using reason. And they don't need to know the future!

Kant's categorical imperative, although we've only very briefly gone through it, clearly has some advantages over utilitarianism. The theory is grounded in the ideas that we should not do something that we would not want others to do to us. In other words, whatever the principles are that we act according to, they should be the same principles we hope other people act according to.

The categorical imperative always says that using people is wrong, no matter what good consequences come out of it. You should never use a person. You should never treat a person as a thing. You should never disrespect a person. These are strengths of the categorical imperative. It follows from that that people have certain rights simply because they're reasoning beings. Race, class, gender are all irrelevant. That a person is a reasoning being is all it takes to have certain rights.

Finally, like utilitarianism, a strength of Kant's categorical imperative is that any rational person can determine the morality of an act just by using reason. Interestingly, however, one advantage over utilitarianism is that a person doesn't need to know the future to figure out what's moral. They simply have to use their reason to imagine whether they could sincerely wish everybody follow the rule they're about to follow. That doesn't require knowing the future. So Kant certainly has offered us a theory that in some respects is highly intuitive. What I'd like to do now is look at some of the shortcomings of the theory.

• Shortcomings of the Categorical Imperative

- Does not allow for exceptions to principles, even in extreme circumstances.

Example: Lying to a murderer.

- Does not offer a solution to situations where principles conflict.
- Assumes that all rational people will arrive at the same universal principles, like don't lie, don't steal, etc. But in fact different people sometimes form different judgments about whether a rule is universalizable.


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Question 2

DS760 - Philosophical Frameworks - Deontology

 Question for Self Assessment: Short Answer

Suppose a pregnant woman got stuck in the entrance of an underground sea cave with 9 others trapped inside and the tide was coming in.

If one of those people had a stick of dynamite, would it be moral as a last resort to detonate it and kill the woman to clear the exit? How would a deontologist (someone who holds a rule-based theory like Kant) reply?

SUBMIT

Answer is at the end of this transcript

Conclusion

Kant's Categorical Imperative is a moral framework that we may be able to work with in evaluating issues in data ethics. It says that certain actions are just plain wrong, no matter what good consequences they may bring about. It rules out any act that involves treating people merely as a means to some other person's end (without their full awareness and agreement).

The Categorical Imperative falls short in never taking into account an action's consequences. Many people think that there should at least be some consideration given to consequences.

In conclusion Kant's categorical imperative is a moral framework that I think we'll be able to work with in evaluating issues in data ethics. It's not perfect. It has its shortcomings. But as I've said earlier, so do all the theories philosophers have come up with thus far. Kant's categorical imperative says certain actions are just plain wrong, no matter what good consequences they bring about. It rules out of any act that involves treating people merely as a means to some other person's end.

The categorical imperative may fall short in never taking into account an action's consequences, however, most people do think that there should be at least some consideration given to consequences.

A Middle Path?

Can we have principles *and* consider consequences?

Ross, Pojman, and others: You should follow morally objective principles, including "Don't cause unnecessary pain and suffering." When these principles conflict, cultural conventions and/or other things dictate how to resolve the conflict.

Principle of Double Effect (Aquinas): Doing an act that has a bad effect is permissible if the act isn't bad in itself, if the bad effect is a mere side effect, if it is not a means to the good effect, and if it does not outweigh the good achieved by the act.

Could it be that there's a middle path between utilitarianism and the categorical imperative? Could it be that we can have principles and consider consequences? This will be the temptation of most people. Our intuitions seem to suggest that principles are important, and yet principles without ever having an exception allowed are too extreme. Consequences seem to matter to morality.

Current philosophers, such as Ross, Pojman, and some others, have proposed theories that seem to include principles, but they've added as a principle something like don't cause unnecessary pain and suffering. The result of this, of course, is that principles would conflict so that they've also offered as part of their theory some sort of explanation about how to resolve these conflicts. Pojman, for instance, suggests that the conflicts are resolved by prioritization, where what principles are considered top priority is a matter of cultural convention. Ross offers other ways to resolve conflict.

The principle of double effect may offer an altogether different middle path. The principle of double effect was formulated first by Aquinas in the Middle Ages. It's part of natural law theory, which was actually eventually embraced by the Catholic church to define morality. According to the principle of double effect, doing an act that has a bad effect is permissible under certain circumstances.

First, the act itself can't be bad in and of itself. You can't murder, for instance, ever. Secondly, if the bad effect is a mere side effect, then perhaps you can do the action so long as the other conditions are met. If it's not a means to

the good effect, that would, again, be another requirement. And finally, if it does not outweigh the good achieved by the good, by the action itself, if you have all four of these conditions met, the principle of double effect says you can do this act along with its bad effect.

In summary, you can do an act that has a bad effect, again, if the act itself isn't bad, if the bad effect is a mere side effect, if it's not a means to the good effect, and if that bad effect does not outweigh the good achieved by the act itself. We will go through an example of this in the quiz, and you'll be able to apply the principle of double effect. You may, in fact, find that this principle proves useful later on when we address the issues in data ethics.

Question 3

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🔊 Question for Self Assessment: Multiple Choice

Which of the following is a criticism raised against Kant's Categorical Imperative?

- ☐ According to the Categorical Imperative, one should always follow universal principles, no matter what. But sometimes it is clear that there should be exceptions made. Kant's theory does not allow for such exceptions.
- ☐ The Categorical Imperative says you must always follow all of the universal principles, but it does not say what to do in cases where two such principles tell you to do conflicting things.
- ☐ According to Kant's theory, it is sometimes ethical to hurt an innocent person, but it is intuitively clear that such behavior is wrong.
- ☐ According to Kant's theory there is no set way to know what is right or wrong in a given culture, since in different cultures different judgments are made about what rules are universal rules.

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Answer is at the end of this transcript

Question 4

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🔊 Question for Self Assessment: Multiple Choice

Which of the following acts is likely to be justified using Kant's deontological (principle-based) reasoning?

- ☐ A) Torturing a terrorist to learn who other terrorists are and where they are located.
- ☐ B) Refusing to lie, as a matter of principle, in a situation where a lie would likely prevent chaos and destruction.
- ☐ C) Signing into law a policy that makes slavery illegal.
- ☐ D) Refusing to marry your true love because you think it will cause too much trouble among the two families if you do.

SUBMIT

Answer is at the end of this transcript

RIGHT & WRONG

The Trolley Problem

Narrated by



Harry Shearer




-1:35



Review this presentation of The Trolley Problem and then answer the last two review questions in this presentation.

Question 5

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 Question for Self Assessment: Multiple Choice

Suppose you could stop a trolley from killing 5 workers on the track by diverting it to a track where only one person is working. Who would say this is moral?

☐ Utilitarians

☐ Deontologists

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Answer is at the end of this transcript

Question 6

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🔒 Question for Self Assessment: Short Answer

Apply the Principle of Double Effect to the trolley problem:

(1) Is it moral to pull the lever to save the 5 workers?


(2) Is it moral to push the fat man to his death to save the 5 workers?

SUBMIT

Answer is at the end of this transcript

Question 1 Answer

DS760 - Philosophical Frameworks - Deontology

 Feedback for Self Assessment

Evaluate the act of a car mechanic charging a client for the costly damage he did to his client's car in his effort to fix it. You may use either version of Kant's Categorical Imperative.

Your answer:


—

Feedback:

A deontologist would need to consider the act itself, and the implied agreement between the mechanic and his client. In considering the act, could you wish all service people charge customers for their mistakes? No! In a mutually respectful arrangement some smaller mistakes may be assumed to be covered by the bill, but large blunders must be dealt with differently.

Question 2 Answer

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 Feedback for Self Assessment

Suppose a pregnant woman got stuck in the entrance of an underground sea cave with 9 others trapped inside and the tide was coming in.

If one of those people had a stick of dynamite, would it be moral as a last resort to detonate it and kill the woman to clear the exit? How would a deontologist (someone who holds a rule-based theory like Kant) reply?

Your answer:

—

Feedback:

If there were no other way and the tide was about to kill all nine people, then a deontologist, would nonetheless say that killing the woman with dynamite is wrong. It involves murdering an innocent person, which is a violation of the principle, "Do not kill innocent people." It also involves using a person – treating her merely as a means to saving others.

Question 3 Answer

DS760 - Philosophical Frameworks - Deontology

Feedback for Self Assessment

✓ Correct!

Which of the following is a criticism raised against Kant's Categorical Imperative?

Your answer:

- According to the Categorical Imperative, one should always follow universal principles, no matter what. But sometimes it is clear that there should be exceptions made. Kant's theory does not allow for such exceptions.
- The Categorical Imperative says you must always follow all of the universal principles, but it does not say what to do in cases where two such principles tell you to do conflicting things.

Correct answer:

- According to the Categorical Imperative, one should always follow universal principles, no matter what. But sometimes it is clear that there should be exceptions made. Kant's theory does not allow for such exceptions.
- The Categorical Imperative says you must always follow all of the universal principles, but it does not say what to do in cases where two such principles tell you to do conflicting things.

Feedback:

Criticizing Kant's theory for not allowing exceptions to universal principles is correct. Kant does not even say it is permissible to lie to save an innocent person's life. In addition, it is also correct to criticize Kant's theory for providing no guidance when universal principles conflict. Kant thought that if you always acted morally you would not find yourself in situations where no matter what you did you would violate at least one universal principle. (If you made incompatible promises, for instance, that's a different story.)

Question 4 Answer

DS760 - Philosophical Frameworks - Deontology

Feedback for Self Assessment

✓ Correct!

Which of the following acts is likely to be justified using Kant's deontological (principle-based) reasoning?

Your answer:

- B) Refusing to lie, as a matter of principle, in a situation where a lie would likely prevent chaos and destruction.
- C) Signing into law a policy that makes slavery illegal.

Correct answer:

- B) Refusing to lie, as a matter of principle, in a situation where a lie would likely prevent chaos and destruction.
- C) Signing into law a policy that makes slavery illegal.

Feedback:
B is correct since it emphasizes acting according to principle. C is correct in that it emphasizes not using people.

Question 5 Answer

DS760 - Philosophical Frameworks - Deontology

Feedback for Self Assessment

✓ Correct!

Suppose you could stop a trolley from killing 5 workers on the track by diverting it to a track where only one person is working. Who would say this is moral?


Your answer:
Utilitarians

Correct answer:
Utilitarians

Feedback:
This is indeed a position that an act utilitarian could take. Greater happiness (less unhappiness) would be brought about by diverting the track.

Question 6 Answer

DS760 - Philosophical Frameworks - Deontology

 Feedback for Self Assessment

Apply the Principle of Double Effect to the trolley problem:

(1) Is it moral to pull the lever to save the 5 workers?

(2) Is it moral to push the fat man to his death to save the 5 workers?

Your answer:

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Feedback:

(1) Yes.

The act of pulling a lever is not immoral in itself. The death of the one worker is a side effect of pulling the lever. It is not a direct means to saving the 5 others. (If he miraculously did not die that would not prevent the good effect.) The death of the one worker is not disproportionate (too great an evil) compared to the good effect of saving lives.

(2) No.

The act of pushing a man to his death is bad in itself and so it is not permissible.