

Ethical Theories

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Deontological Ethics

- Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

*“There is nothing in the world, indeed nothing even beyond it, that could be regarded as good without qualification — except **a good will**.”*



Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785)

- Explain the core ideas of Kant's deontological ethics and Rawls's theory of justice.
- Distinguish hypothetical from categorical imperatives and apply Kant's universalization test.
- Summarize Rawls's original position, veil of ignorance, and two principles of justice.
- Apply Kantian and Rawlsian ethics to business dilemmas.

Intelligence, wit, judgment, and the other mental talents, (...) are, as qualities of temperament certainly good and desirable in many respects; but they can also be extremely bad and harmful when the will which makes use of these gifts of nature and whose specific quality we refer to as character, is no good."

Kant, I.: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), BA I, 2

Definition

The **good will** is a will that acts **from duty**, out of **respect for the moral law**, not from inclination, fear, or desire for outcomes.

The good will is:

1. **Pure** – acts are not guided by self-interest.
2. **Free** – guided by principles we give ourselves (autonomy).
3. **Based on reason** – grounded in our capacity for rational thought.

Moral worth lies in the principle of action — not in outcomes.

Condition 1: Purity — Free from Self-Interest

Definition:

A morally good will must act **purely from duty**, not from inclination, emotion, or expected benefit.

Explanation: An action only has **moral worth** if it is done because it is the right thing to do. Doing the right thing *because it benefits you or your company* is not morally pure.

Example

- A company avoids child labor not because of public pressure, but because it believes **exploitation is wrong** — even if no one finds out.
- This satisfies the condition of **purity**.
- If done only to avoid scandal or boost image: *no moral worth*.

Condition 2: Freedom — Acting Autonomously

Definition: The good will acts out of **freedom**, by following moral principles chosen by the agent's own reason.

Explanation:

- **Freedom** \neq **doing what you want**, but acting according to moral law you recognize as binding.
- The will is morally good only if it chooses the right independently of external pressure.

Business Example

- A whistleblower reports internal fraud because she believes **honesty is a duty**, even though her job is at risk.
- \rightarrow She is **free** in the Kantian sense — following her own moral law, not her desires or fear.

Definition:

The **good will** is guided by **practical reason** — our capacity to understand and act upon universal moral laws.

Why Reason Matters for Kant:

- **Only rational beings** can formulate and recognize moral duties.
- Emotions, desires, and inclinations are unreliable guides to morality.
- Reason allows us to act **autonomously**, not as slaves to impulse or social norms.

Kant's View:

Reason is the faculty of principles; it formulates the law which the will ought to follow.

Implication:

A good will is not instinctual — it requires conscious, rational moral deliberation.

Example: Fair Wage Policy

- A company develops a wage system based not only on market trends or profit maximization,
- but on the principle: *“People doing equal work deserve equal compensation that respects their dignity.”*
- This principle can be **rationally justified and universalized**.

Contrast:

- “We pay minimum wage because everyone else does” → shows **conformity**, not **moral reflection**.
- “We pay fair wages because every rational person would agree it respects human dignity” → grounded in **reason**.

Duties - Imperatives

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graph TD; A[Duties - Imperatives] --> B[Hypothetical Imperative: action as a means to an end if you want x do y]; A --> C[Categorical Imperative: action per se do z with no ifs and/or buts];
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Hypothetical Imperative:

action as a means
to an end
if you want x do y

Exp.: ... if you want to reach the top of your firm, be friendly."

Categorical Imperative:

action per se
do z with no ifs and/or buts

Exp.: "Be friendly."

Definition:

A hypothetical imperative commands an action **only if** you have a particular goal or intention. It is always of the form:

“If you want X, do Y.”

A hypothetical imperative is conditional: it tells you what you ought to do *only* if you have a certain desire or end.

For example, “If you want to pass the exam, you should study.” The obligation to study applies only if you have the goal of passing the exam. If you do not have that goal, the imperative does not apply to you.

Other Examples:

- If you want to earn money, go to work.
- If your goal is to increase profits, sell fair trade products.

Definition:

A categorical imperative commands an action **unconditionally**. It applies universally, regardless of desires, situations, or goals.

“Do this.”

Examples:

- Study because it's your duty — not to pass the exam.
- Sell ethical products because it's the right thing to do — not to boost brand image.

Key Points:

- The fundamental principle of morality.
- Based on **reason**, not on outcomes or feelings.
- Acting from **duty for duty's sake** — even when it's inconvenient.

1st: Universal Law:

"Act only on that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

2nd: Humanity as End:

"Always treat the humanity in a person as an end and never as a means merely."

3rd: Kingdom of Ends:

"So act as if you were a member of an ideal kingdom of ends in which you were both subject and sovereign at the same time."

“Act only on that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

Explanation:

- A **maxim** is a personal principle or rule that guides your actions — essentially, the reason you give yourself for doing something.
- Kant’s test: Imagine a world where **everyone** follows this maxim in similar situations.
- If, when universalized, the maxim leads to a **contradiction** (for example, the purpose of the action would be undermined if everyone did it), then it cannot be morally acceptable.
- The first formula demands that we act only on principles that could be willed as **universal laws** — ensuring **fairness**, **consistency**, and **respect** for others as moral agents.

Startup in Trouble!

- Your new **StartUp** is in deep financial trouble.
- You need money *urgently* to save the jobs of 50 employees!
- You ask a good friend for a loan.
- She says: *"I can give you the amount now, you have to return the money in one month."*
- **But:** You *know for sure* you have no intention (or ability) to pay the money back in one month.

Task: Should you try to convince somebody to lend you the money by promising them to pay it back?

Definition:

A **maxim** is the personal principle behind an action — a statement of intention plus reasoning.

Possible maxims:

- *“When I am in financial distress, I may make a false promise to secure support.”*
- *“It is acceptable to lie when many jobs are at risk.”*
- *“I should always tell the truth, regardless of consequences.”*

Why this matters:

Kant’s test of morality begins by identifying the **maxim** behind your proposed action.

Reflective Step 2: Hypothetical vs. Categorical Maxims

Hypothetical Imperatives

- *"If I want to save jobs, I should make a false promise."*
- *"If I want to secure funding, I must lie to investors."*

Categorical Imperatives

- *"Always tell the truth, regardless of the consequences."*
- *"One must never make a promise with the intention to break it."*

Only **categorical** imperatives can serve as moral principles in Kant's framework.

Reflective Step 3: Which Maxims Can Be Universalized?

Kant's Universalization Test:

Can you will that your maxim becomes a **universal law**?

StartUp Example:

"Whenever someone is in financial distress, they may break promises."

→ **Universalized:** No one would trust promises. The very concept would collapse.

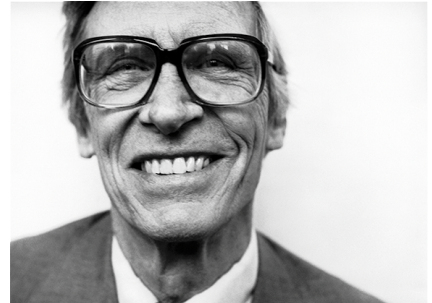
Conclusion:

- Such a maxim fails due to a **logical contradiction**.
- It undermines the institution it relies on — promising.

Only a maxim like "Always keep promises" can be universalized.

- **John Rawls (1921–2002)**

“Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust.”



A Theory of Justice (1971)

- **Purpose:** To define fairness by removing personal bias from moral and political decision-making.
- **Setup:** Imagine rational agents designing the rules of society — but they do so **behind a veil of ignorance**.
- **What they don't know:** Their own future role — rich or poor, CEO or employee, healthy or sick, talented or not.
- **Why it matters:** Ensures that principles chosen are just for **everyone**, not tailored to one's own advantage.

Moral Point:

You should endorse principles only if you'd accept them no matter where you end up in the system.

Business Relevance:

Would you accept your firm's promotion, pay, or parental leave policies if you didn't know your gender, background, or career track?

- **Function:** Strips away knowledge of your own position in society — status, wealth, abilities, gender, or background.
- **Moral Purpose:** Prevents biased judgments that serve personal interest; forces you to consider principles that are **fair to all**.
- **Effect:** You must ask: *Would I accept this rule even in the worst possible position?*
- **Philosophical Parallel:** Mirrors Kant's categorical imperative — act only on principles that could be willed by all rational agents.

The veil does not tell you what to decide — it forces you to decide **without privilege**.

Rawls's First Principle

Each person is to have an equal right to basic liberties compatible with a similar liberty for others.

What this means:

- Every individual has equal rights to **basic liberties**, including:
 - Freedom of thought and conscience
 - Political liberty (voting, public office)
 - Freedom of speech and assembly
 - Freedom of religion
 - Personal property and the rule of law
- These liberties are **lexically prior** — they cannot be sacrificed for greater efficiency or social advantage.
- Justice requires that no one's fundamental freedoms be limited to increase others' welfare.

Rawls's Second Principle — Two Conditions

1. **Fair Equality of Opportunity:**

Social and economic positions (jobs, offices, income) must be open to everyone, giving all individuals with similar talents and willingness to use them the same life chances.

2. **The Difference Principle:**

Inequalities are justified only if they benefit the **least advantaged** members of society.

Key Implications:

- Inequalities (e.g., income, authority) are not inherently unjust — but must serve justice.
- Equal opportunity means more than non-discrimination: it requires fair access to education, networks, and careers.
- The Difference Principle demands that any inequality must **improve the position of the worst off**.

Utilitarianism:

- Justice = maximizing total or average welfare across society.
- Willing to sacrifice the few for the benefit of the many.
- Focuses on aggregate outcomes, not individual rights.

Rawlsian Response:

- Each person has **inviolable moral claims** that cannot be overridden by social benefit.
- Justice is about the **structure of fair institutions**, not overall happiness.
- Inequalities must be justified from the perspective of the **least advantaged**.

→ Rawls would reject profit-driven decisions that harm the vulnerable, even if they increase overall success.