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# **Moral Systems, Ethical Concepts & Theories**

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# Kantianism

# Who was kant?

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was born in Germany, and never travelled more than 10 miles outside of it during his entire life.

He had a very strict routine – the story goes that local people used to set their watches by the time Kant went by on this daily walk!

But he is perhaps the most influential philosopher of the past 300 years.



# Kantianism/Deontology

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- The Greek root *deon* means duty.
- Kantianism Theory says.. **People's actions are guided by the universal moral laws.** These laws are based on logical reasons i.e. A Kantian can explain why an action is right or wrong.

# Kantianism/Deontology

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- Kantianism is based on a universal principle which is to treat everyone equally and respectfully
- Kant argued that morality must ultimately be grounded in the **concept of duty, or obligations** that humans have to one another, and **never in the consequences** of human actions.

# Good Will

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- Kant argued that most things we think of as good are not *always* good. Intelligence, wealth etc. could always be used for evil.
- For Kant, ***the only thing that is always good in itself is a good will.*** (This is a motivation to do the right thing, whatever it is.)

# The importance of universalizability

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This means that (for Kant) *moral laws must be universal* – they must be the kind of laws that everyone could discover and follow.

# Kantianism/Deontology

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**This theory states:**

“what makes an action right or wrong is the principle inherent in the action”.

If an action is done from a **sense of duty** and if the principle of action **can be universalized**, then the action is right.”

# Kantianism/Deontology

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Examples:

- telling the truth can be universalized.
- murder cannot be universalized – if everybody murdered people who they did not like then there would be no people left!
- lying cannot be universalized – if everybody lied then nobody would believe what anybody says, and lying would be pointless!

# The “categorical imperative”

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Since moral laws must be universal, they cannot depend on a particular person’s circumstances or their desires.

Kant called these laws “*categorical imperatives*” – they identify principles that we should all always follow.

# Categorical Imperative (1<sup>st</sup> Formulation)

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*if an action can be universalized,  
then the action is right*

# Illustration of 1<sup>st</sup> Formulation

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**Question:** Can a person in dire straits make a promise with the intention of breaking it later?

**Proposed rule:** “I may make promises with the intention of later breaking them.”

The person in trouble wants his promise to be believed so he can get what he needs.

**Universalize rule:**

Everyone breaking promises would make promises unbelievable, contradicting desire to have promise believed

The rule is flawed. The answer is “No.”

## Categorical Imperative (2<sup>nd</sup> Formulation)

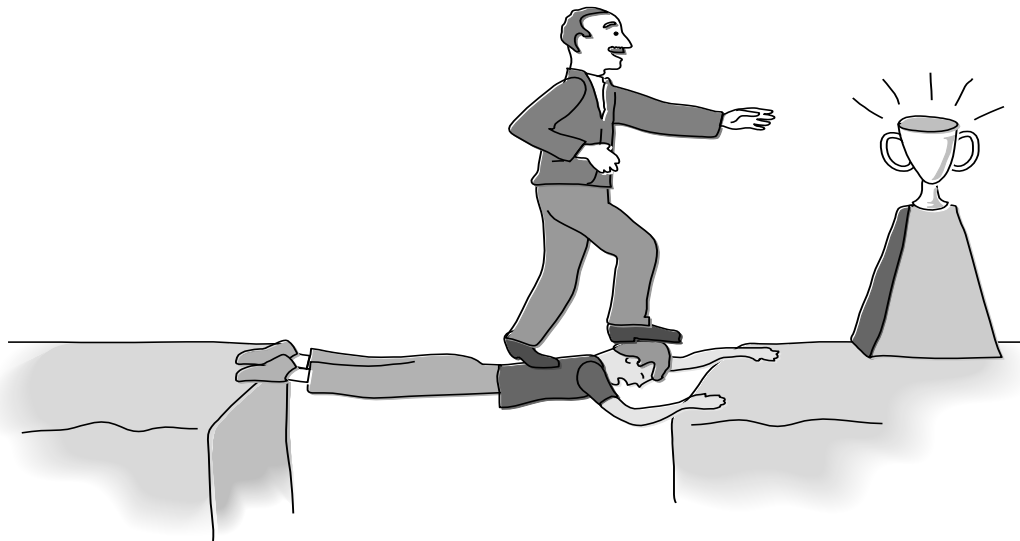
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*“Act so that you treat both yourself  
and other people as ends  
and never only as means to an end.”*

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Formulation of Categorical Imperative

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The Categorical Imperative says it is wrong for one person to “use” another for his means. Instead, every interaction with other people must respect them as rational beings.



# Treating people as “ends in themselves”

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Kant thought that human reason was extremely valuable.

To respect other people’s reason, and their ability to discover and follow the moral law, **we must never use them for our own purposes.**

Kant expressed this by saying that we should never treat humanity “merely as a means” (to getting what we want), but “always as an end in itself”.

# Semi-conductor Fabrication Plant Scenario

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- Manufactures integrated 8-inch wafers.
- The plant is going to shut in one year
- Moving the production to other sites to manufacture 12-inch wafer.
- Need new employees this year. The applicants are from other states.
- Applicants will not move in case they will come to know about the closing of the plant.
- Result in hiring less qualified local workers.

***Question: Should the information be disclosed to the applicants?***

# Semi-conductor Fabrication Plant Scenario contd.

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Using Kantian Evaluation (2nd Formulation) :

- It is an obligation to inform the applicants, since the information will influence their decisions.
- If the information is denied, the applicants are treated ***as a means to an end and not as ends in themselves.***

# Plagiarism Scenario

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- Carla
  - Single mother
  - Works full time
  - Takes two evening courses/semester
- History class
  - Requires more work than normal
  - Carla earning an “A” on all work so far
  - Carla doesn’t have time to write final report
- Carla purchases report and submits it as her own work

# Plagiarism Scenario contd.

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Using Kantian Evaluation (1<sup>st</sup> Formulation)

- Carla wants credit for plagiarized report
- Rule: “You may claim credit for work performed by someone else”
- ***If rule is universalized***, reports would no longer be credible indicators of student’s knowledge, and professors would not give credit for reports
- Proposed moral rule is self-defeating.
- It is wrong for Carla to turn in a purchased report

# Plagiarism Scenario contd.

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Carla submitted another person's work as her own. She attempted to deceive professor. She treated professor as a means to an end

- End: passing the course
- Means: professor issues grade

What Carla did was wrong.

# Perfect and imperfect duties

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In Kantian ethics, the distinction between **perfect** and **imperfect** duties is crucial for understanding how moral obligations are categorized and prioritized.

# Perfect duties

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A perfect duty is an absolute, unconditional obligation that must always be followed without exception. These duties are binding in all circumstances.

## Characteristics:

- **Strict:** There is no room for flexibility or exceptions.
- **Negative Duties:** Often framed as duties not to do something (e.g., "Do not lie," "Do not steal").
- **Universalizable:** These duties must be able to be applied universally without contradiction.

Example: The duty not to lie. According to Kant, lying is always morally wrong, regardless of the situation or consequences.

# Imperfect duties

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An imperfect duty is a moral obligation that is more flexible and allows for discretion in how it is fulfilled. These duties are still important but not as rigid as perfect duties.

## Characteristics:

- **Flexible:** There is some way in how and when the duty is fulfilled.
- **Positive Duties:** Often involve duties to do something (e.g., "Help others," "Cultivate your talents").
- **Contextual:** These duties are generally context-dependent and allow for prioritization based on circumstances.

Example: The duty to help others. You are morally obliged to help people, but you can choose when, where, and how to do so, and you're not required to help every single person you encounter.

# Perfect vs Imperfect duties

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## Summary of Differences:

1. **Rigidity:** Perfect duties are strict and must always be followed, while imperfect duties allow for some flexibility.
2. **Form:** Perfect duties are often negative (what you must not do), whereas imperfect duties are often positive (what you should do).
3. **Application:** Perfect duties apply universally and without exception, while imperfect duties are context-dependent and allow for personal judgment in their fulfillment.

# Case for Kantianism

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- This theory is **rational** because the act is based on logic.
- Produces **universal moral guidelines** applied to all people for all of history.
- Treats all persons as **moral equals** i.e. people in similar situations should be treated in similar ways.
- **Workable** ethical theory.

# Kantianism

**Act so that you treat both yourself and other people as ends in themselves and never only as a means to an end.”**

Workable Theory because the act is based on logic and produces universal guidelines.

# Case Against Kantianism

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**1) Sometimes no single rule adequately characterizes an action.**

Example: Imagine you promise to meet a friend for coffee, but on the way, you see someone injured who needs immediate help. The action of stopping to help the injured person can be characterized by the rule "help those in need" and by "keep your promises." Kantianism might struggle to prioritize one over the other since both are morally significant.

# Case Against Kantianism

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## 2) Sometimes there is no way to resolve a conflict between rules

Example: Suppose you are asked by a friend whether you like their new outfit, but you actually think it looks bad. The rules "always tell the truth" and "be kind to others" are in conflict. Kantianism might not provide a clear resolution because both are considered important duties.

# Case Against Kantianism

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Sometimes there is no way to resolve a conflict between rules (examples)

- *In a conflict between a perfect duty and an imperfect duty, perfect duty prevails*

**Example:** Suppose you are asked by a friend whether you like their new outfit, but you actually think it looks bad. The rules "always tell the truth" and "be kind to others" are in conflict. Kantianism might not provide a clear resolution because both are considered important duties.

- *In a conflict between two perfect duties, no solution*

**Example:** If you are faced with a situation where you must either lie (violating the perfect duty not to lie) to protect someone's life (honoring the perfect duty to preserve life), Kantianism might not provide a clear way to choose between these two conflicting perfect duties.

# Case Against Kantianism

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3) Kantianism allows no exceptions to perfect duties.

Example: Suppose you are hiding someone from a murderer, and the murderer asks you where the person is. According to Kantianism, you cannot lie, even in this extreme situation, because lying is a violation of a perfect duty, and Kantianism does not allow exceptions to perfect duties, even in life-threatening situations.

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Despite weaknesses, Kantianism is considered a workable ethical theory