Deontology

- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
- Founder of Deontology
The right act is that which is in accordance with the correct moral rule (GK. *deon*) or principle (Kant calls these “maxims”)

- Rejects hedonism
- Rejects consequentialism
- Different from Rule Utilitarianism--the rules of deontology aren’t based on how much happiness they would produce.
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The only thing which is intrinsically good is a good will.
A good will acts independently of the consequences.
Other SUPPOSED intrinsic goods:

- Happiness
- Intelligence
- Wit
- Freedom

All of the above can be bad if not combined with a good will.
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Kant: 2 types of motives
• Desire
• Reason
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3 motives for the shopkeeper’s honesty
- Direct inclination (desire)
- Indirect inclination (desire)
- Duty (reason)
DUTY means performing an action

- Out respect for the moral law
- From principle
- Because it’s right (or wrong)

Mixed motives OK if duty is primary.
If duty and desire coincide, you’re just lucky.

- Ex: The duty to preserve your life
- Having good desires itself is not praiseworthy.
- The Compassionate Philanthropist
- Mr. Feziwig
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Objection
• Kant’s view implies Mother Theresa is no better than Scrooge!

Reply
• Both are motivated by desire
• Only the consequences differ
• Morality is independent of consequences
• People can’t control what they desire
• They can control their rational choices
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• To act morally, you must appreciate the act’s moral qualities
• Kant is a psychological egoist with regard to desire
• Moral action isn’t motivated by desire, but by reason
• Morality is doing what you should do, whether you want to or not
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Imperative
• A general policy or principle of action
• A command we give ourselves

2 Kinds of Imperatives
• Hypothetical: tell you how to achieve some desire.
• Categorical: tells you what you must do regardless of your desires.
Hypothetical Imperatives

- Practical guides unrelated to morality
- “If you want X, do Y.”
- If you want to lose weight, eat fewer calories and exercise more.
- If you want a safe yet profitable investment, select a diversified mutual fund.
- If you want to improve your grades, spend more time studying.
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Categorical Imperatives

• Absolute guides which comprise morality
• “Don’t do Y!” “Do X!” or
• Don’t kill innocent people!
• Don’t cheat on your ethics test!
• Help those in need!
• Keep your promises!
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The Categorical Imperative

• The principle which unites all individual categorical imperatives
• Can be formulated various ways
• Each formulation acts as a test
Maxim = Principle of Action

Universal Law Formulation of the CI:

*Act only on a maxim you could will to be a universal law.*

Since morality is universal, any maxim must be universalizable.

Ex: The False Promise

You can’t imagine a world where everyone acts on the maxim: *contradiction in concept*
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Other examples

- Suicide
- Murder
- Theft

The above
- contain contradictions in concept
- Generate negative duties
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Ex: The Rugged Individualist
You can imagine a world where no one ever helps without a reward.
You can’t consistently will such a world: contradiction in will
Contradictions in will generate positive duties.

Ex: The Unambitious Person
The Humanity Forumlation of the CI:

*Act so as to treat humanity as an end in itself, never merely as a means.*

It’s wrong to use people.
People can’t be treated like tools or inanimate objects.
You must consider the goals and interests of others.
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Examples

• The Jealousy Plot
• The Tyrannical Boss
• Theft, murder
• Prostitution

Objection: Doesn’t modern life require impersonal interactions

Reply: Maybe common courtesy is enough.
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Criticisms

• Doesn’t tell you what to do when two duties conflict
• The consequences do seem to matter in extreme cases
Deontology Criticisms

• Too absolutist, inflexible, severe - no exceptions to moral rules
• Assigns no moral value to attitudes, feelings, or actions motivated by them
• Pessimist about human nature (egoism)
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Criticisms

- Assumes all rational people will agree on moral principles
- Ways to cheat with the categorical imperative
- Kant’s conclusions don’t necessarily always follow his principles, e.g. suicide, prostitution