

BUSINESS ETHICS :: Kantian Ethics (Deontology)

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Introduction

Last week we looked at the theory of utility, which stated that we have a moral obligation to take the course of action that will have the greatest consequence. And the best consequence is happiness/pleasure in utilitarianism because pleasure is the one absolute good. Kant's moral theory is a form of deontology. This term, 'deontology', comes from the Greek word *deon*, meaning duty. The theory of deontology states that we are morally obliged to act in accordance with a certain set of principles/rules regardless of the outcome. These two theories are polar opposites. Some people in the class were attracted to the idea (in utilitarianism) of making the most people the most happy, or saving more lives given a certain set of circumstances. There are some ethical difficulties with utilitarianism however, and one of the most significant of these is the disregard for intrinsic value in all persons - the justification of killing one to save many.

Today we will evaluate one of the major alternative views of ethical human conduct - Kantian deontology. It is referred to as Kantian deontology because like utilitarianism, deontological theories (theories of duty) have existed for centuries, but the most influential form of deontology is the moral theory put forward by Immanuel Kant in 1788.

Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant was born in 1724 in the Prussian city of Königsberg (Germany). He studied and worked at the local university until three years before his death and never travelled further than fifty miles outside of the city. He was a philosopher and scientist, working in many areas including mathematics, astrophysics, geography and anthropology. He wrote several dense, difficult-to-read but highly influential texts regarding metaphysics, meta- and practical morality, science, history and politics. He was the first recorded scholar to suggest that some of the faint nebulae visible with a telescope are actually separate universes. His new ideas about the nature of reality and free will were widely condemned at the time in which he published his works but have remained prominently influential to this day.

In terms of ethics, the most significant of his works are *Groundwork in the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and

Metaphysics of Morals (1798). These texts constitute the foundation of Kant's own moral philosophy, mostly focusing on morality and action.

A Theory of Duty

Some terminology

Moral agent: An agent is a person who performs an action, a moral agent is a person with the capacity to act morally.

Maxim: rule or principle

Will: The faculty of deciding, choosing, or acting

Deontological theories differ from utilitarian theories in several ways. The most notable of these is that while utilitarianism aims at a certain goal, e.g. happiness, and justifies any act that achieves that goal precisely because it achieves it. Deontological theories hold that some acts are always wrong - even if they achieve morally admirable ends. An act, in deontology, is always judged independently of its outcome. This is because deontologists do not equate the right with the good (like utilitarians do).

Kant is responsible for the most prominent and well known form of deontological ethics. Kant's moral theory is based on his view of the human being as having the unique capacity for rationality. No other animal possesses such a propensity for reasoned thought and action, and it is exactly this ability which obliges us to act according to the moral law/duty. Kant's moral theory emphasises acting in accordance with and *for the sake of* duty. Kant believed that inclinations, emotions and consequences should play no role in moral action. This means that the motivation for action must be based on obligation. Morality should provide us with a framework of rational principles (rules) that guide and *restrict* action - independent of personal intentions and desires.

It is worth mentioning that another divergence between the theories of utility and deontology is the way in which they are constructed: utilitarianism is concerned with actively maximising the good while deontology is more negatively focused on avoiding the morally impermissible (or on the constraints on action).

The moral worth of an action is determined by the will. The human will is the only thing in the world that can be considered good without qualification, according to Kant. Good will is exercised by acting according to moral duty/law. The moral law consists of a set of moral maxims which are categorical in nature.

Imperatives

There are two types of imperatives. The first is hypothetical (conditional) which takes the form 'if you want X, you should do Y', and this type can apply to any action. The second sort of imperative is the categorical which takes the form 'you should do X'/'do X' - it applies to moral action and demands unconditional performance of an action for its own sake. This is because morality is independent of wants and consequences. The categorical imperative is sometimes referred to as the universal law as Kant believed that by using reason one could determine whether a maxim was categorical or not and because all

human beings are rational then the same categorical imperatives will hold for everyone.

We use reason and a test of universalisability to determine whether a moral principle is a categorical imperative (or universal law). Kant expressed the universal law using the following formula:

Act only according to the maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law

Using reasoned judgement we can apply this formula to any maxim and discover if it is morally permissible. Take the example of picking flowers from the local park - the flowers are very pretty and when I see them I immediately want to pick some to take some home with me. Using the formula of the universal law (categorical imperative), imagining the scenario if everyone were to adopt the maxim *pick flowers whenever you wish*. Do any irrationalities/ contradictions arise from the adoption of such a maxim as universal law? Certainly, if everyone were to do this there would be no flowers left in the park and this would contradict our original motivation for desiring the flowers. It would be more rational to go to a flower shop and buy similar flowers or grow my own.

There are a few acts that are always forbidden - lying so negatively affects trust between people and the meaning of truth that it is always forbidden. This remains the case when lying would have advantageous or even morally admirable consequences. Imagine a psychotic patient wants to kill your colleague (a psychiatrist) who had her committed. If you lie about the whereabouts of your colleague then an innocent life will be saved. But moral duty forbids you from lying!

Alternative formulation of categorical imperative

Kant expressed the categorical imperative in a few different ways. The most important of these is the formula of humanity - this states:

Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means

This is a personal perspective on the same moral theory. To fail to do this would be to treat others in a way that would contradict the moral law - If I steal a book from Stephen, I am treating him as a means only (to obtain a book). If I ask to have his book, I am respecting his right to say no, and am thereby treating him as an end-in-himself, not as a means to an end. If I only ask for the book in order to appear nice (and to make Stephen more likely to do things for me in the future), then I am also treating him as a means *only*. It is true that everyone uses people as a means to an ends - bus/taxi-drivers get us where we want to go, factory workers are the means to producing objects and ultimately profit for their employer - but using people *only* to get what we want and consistently disrespecting their human worth is against the moral law. An example of this would be a factory owner who imposes inhumane working conditions and pays less than minimum wage (as long as he can get away with it).

Criticisms

One of the biggest difficulties with Kantian ethics is that it discounts outcome as a valid factor in evaluating the moral worth of an action. While it is not necessarily wise to rely solely on outcome (as in utilitarianism), it is problematic to discount the outcome altogether - as we saw in the dilemma of lying (to the psychotic killer).

The life and dignity of every human individual is inviolable (sacred) - based on the formula of humanity. This means that it would be impermissible to enslave 20 people regardless of whether or not it meant that 80 people with disabilities would be aided by the slaves and lead much better lives. This seems like an advantage Kantian ethics has over utilitarianism. But what if killing one person would save the lives of 3 million people who will otherwise die? This would also be impermissible according to Kantian principles.

At times Kantian moral duty seems to conflict with our natural inclinations/common sense. If we obey the moral law rather than our intuitions we are acting morally.

Deontological ethics is mostly concerned with what not to do - the categorical imperative can only guide our conduct in so far as advising us against morally wrong acts. It does not tell us what to live/aim for or what to value.

Moral Dilemma

Today's moral dilemma is TRAIN WRECK. You are to imagine you are a train controller (driver) on a train that has had technical problems - the breaks are gone. You have detached all the passenger carriages a few miles back and are hoping to run out of fuel but there is enough for you to keep going at full speed for another 20 miles.

On the railway line ahead of you some maniac has tied 5 people to the tracks. The only thing that works on the train is the direction lever which can redirect the train where there is an adjoining track. Just when you decide you had better redirect to avoid the deaths of 5 innocent people - you see that the maniac has been really busy because there is another person tied to the adjoining track. You have to change direction - and therefore implicitly decide to kill the one person, or leave the train on its original course and see 5 people killed.

Discuss in groups:

1. What would the Kantian deontologist do?
2. What would the utilitarian do?
3. Which is the ethically preferable choice?
4. What if the 5 were paedophiles and the 1 was disaster-prone Martin (from the supermarket fire)?
5. What if the 5 are unknown to you but the 1 is your mother?