



# Lecture 6

# Workable Ethical Theories I

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# Participation Quiz

Pick an answer between A – E at random.

What answer (A – E) do you think will have been selected most frequently in the previous poll?

# Recap: Unworkable Ethical Theories

- What is an ethical theory?
- What do we mean by a workable theory?
- What does each unworkable theory consist of?
  - subjective relativism
  - cultural relativism
  - divine command
  - ethical egoism

## 2.6 Kantianism

- Key goal: derive morality from more basic principles
- Is anything good regardless of its consequences?
- Immanuel Kant: Only thing in the world that is good without qualification is a good will (desire to do the right thing)
  - other things we might call good (e.g., giving to charity) really depend on consequences
- Reason should cultivate desire to do right thing. Make this precise?



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

**Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws.**

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

- 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 may make & break promises
- 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)

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

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**“This is usually an easier formulation to work  
with than the first formulation of the  
Categorical Imperative.”**

*...but watch out for the “only”.*

# Second formulation follows from the first

From Wikipedia (“Categorical Imperative”):

*The free will is the source of all rational action. But to treat it as a [means to an end] is to deny the possibility of freedom in general. Because the autonomous will is the one and only source of moral action, **it would contradict the first formulation to claim that a person is merely a means to some other end, rather than always an end in themselves.***



# Exercise

- In groups of four, identify two ethical issues at the intersection of computers and society:
  - One that is ethical from a Kantian perspective
  - One that is not
- Be prepared to explain your reasoning, using the categorical imperative.

# Exercise

Work with another student (not a member of your previous group) to consider the following scenario using the categorical imperative:

Google Books aims to digitize a vast number of books and put them online. Many books have unclear copyright status (e.g., the owner may have died without transferring the rights, or might just be hard to find). In these cases, Google treats the book as though it was out of copyright, but allows copyright holders to appeal, in which case they take the scans offline. Google argues that they provide a valuable service, because no other company has the technology to scan these books, and hence many works that would be inaccessible or lost are now available to all.

**Is Google's behavior ethical from a Kantian perspective?**

# Case for Kantianism

- Rational
- Produces universal moral guidelines
- Treats all people as moral equals
- Workable ethical theory

# Perfect and Imperfect Duties

- Perfect duty: duty obliged to fulfill without exception
  - Examples: Telling the truth
- Imperfect duties are still duties that can be inferred by the application of “pure reason”: i.e., the first or second formulations of the categorical imperative. But they’re:
  - Activities you couldn’t keep doing forever; never “done”
  - Cause for praise if you do it; not cause for blame if you don’t.
- So what *are* imperfect duties?
  - Examples: helping others; developing your talents.
- More generally:
  - Furthering the ends of ourselves and others.
  - Not following maxims that lead to undesirable states of affairs (as distinct from logical contradictions) when universalized
- Not everything we think of as “good” is even an imperfect duty (e.g., doing my chores)

# Case Against Kantianism

- Sometimes no rule adequately characterizes an action
- Sometimes there is no way to resolve a conflict between rules
  - In a conflict between a perfect duty and an imperfect duty, perfect duty prevails
  - In a conflict between two perfect duties, no solution
- Kantianism allows no exceptions to perfect duties