

Kant's deontological ethical theory: true moral enlightenment

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Immanuel Kant's deontological ethical theory, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, can be viewed from many different perspectives. As it is based on duty operating as a final good, the theory of utilitarianism (a moral theory concerned with actions in themselves) disputes main concepts of Kant such as the moral law and the categorical imperative and how each relates to individuals' moral and physical experiences. However, specific aspects of utilitarianism such as the consideration of circumstances can actually be argued as supporting evidence for the deontological view, showing that regardless of compelling counter-arguments, Kant's theory should be considered the standard by which we base our moral decisions.

Understanding Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is a crucial first step in comprehending the reasons behind its superiority as an ethical theory. First, breaking down the philosophy utilized to create this theory into separate, individual aspects, may help to follow how they eventually fit together. Kant used three specific areas of philosophy in the formation of this theory: physics, ethics, and logic. Physics refers to the physical world, in this case the actions taking place. Ethics are associated with morals, what Kant presents as maxim, the thought process or motivation for a particular action. Logic refers to logical principles, or the rationale used before acting to determine whether our maxim is morally permissible. Kant arrived at the first major condition of his moral theory, the idea of Moral Law, through a combination of two of these philosophical aspects, physics and ethics. The moral law states that actions (physics) are only moral (ethics), if taken to achieve moral ends. This implies that interests of the neither individual, circumstances, nor consequences cannot be considered. This view considers

our motivation, as the only aspect that matters in determining morality. In other words, intention of the individual is everything, regardless of the outcomes.

An important concept in moral law is anti-consequentialism, meaning that the actual consequences of an action do not matter because they are out of a person's direct control. Only the foreseen consequences need to be considered. Kant believes that good will is the only thing that is inherently good, and therefore good will has intrinsic worth. Because of this, Kant rejects the concept of moral luck, any circumstance in which luck has an influence on the outcome of a moral decision. For example, suppose a man shoots another man dead and is caught versus a man who attempts to shoot another man dead, but misses and is caught. Moral law suggests that punishing an attempted murderer less than the man who actually committed murder, as the legal system of society often does, makes no moral sense with consideration to the man's mal-intent. Because moral law also refuses to recognize any personal gain in regards to the morality of an action, it tells you which hypothetical imperatives are permissible, and which are immoral, meaning that a hypothetical imperative is conditional. There is no singular hypothetical imperative. Therefore, moral law is categorical, not hypothetical.

The categorical imperative of the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals introduces the third philosophical principle utilized in the creation of Kant's deontological ethical theory: logic, or the reason behind determining the morality of our maxim. The categorical imperative states that we should act

as if we would will our actions to become universal law. This is the opposite of the hypothetical imperative, which acts on instrumental rationality (determining the means by which an individual can achieve his or her own goal). The categorical imperative reduces morality to rationale that should be able to be applied in all circumstances to all individuals. For instance, imagine a scene in which you owe a large sum of money to a bookie due to gambling debt, and if you do not pay off this debt in a timely manner, your life has been threatened. However, you do not have the money to give to the bookie. You decide to borrow money from a wealthy friend whom you tell you will pay back what you borrow as soon as you are able to, but actually have no intent to repay. The maxim behind making a false promise is that it will get you out of serious trouble. This is the hypothetical imperative: your goal is to save your own life, and to achieve that goal you make a false promise. However, further examination might result in the formation of a categorical imperative, the reflection of how society would be affected if everyone were to act on this maxim. This example clearly shows the consideration of the formula of humanity as well, a critical aspect of the categorical imperative that states that we should always treat others as ends in themselves and not merely as means to our own purposes. When people violate the categorical imperative, they are applying a different standard to themselves than they would to everyone else. Essentially, they are making an exception of themselves, which may create contradictions. So in our bookie example, if making false promises was universalized, the institution of promising would be destroyed and in turn your plan would not work.

Therefore, one should not will the universality of making false promises to get out of trouble.

A moral theory that clashes with Kant's is utilitarianism. In contrast, utilitarianism is concerned with the actions themselves rather than the maxims behind them. As Mill said, "Motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action, but much with the worth of the agent" (Utilitarianism, 491). In a general sense, utilitarianism says that regardless of motivation, actions are moral if they produce happiness and are not moral when they produce the opposite of happiness. In defense of this, Kant relies on the logical principle of the categorical imperative that reduces morality to pure rationality. He argues that reason is not conducive to this definition of moral actions because only deserved happiness is good. Happiness cannot be unconditionally good because inclination is not sufficient for morality as actions that promote happiness done for the wrong reason pull you away from duty, the true final good.

Another aspect of utilitarianism that counters the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals is Bentham's argument in favor of the consideration of circumstances in the determination of whether an action is or is not moral. He says that the measure of morality should be on an individual case-by-case basis because certain contextual factors may have an influence on the morality of the performed action. This explicitly goes against Kant's moral law that interests, circumstances, and consequences cannot be considered. An obvious rebuttal to this alternate view would be that if circumstances are considered, a potential to convince ourselves to break rules without true

justification exists. Whereas abiding by Kant's moral law and maintaining indifference to circumstance by observing only intention will help us to preserve impartiality, a definitive aspect of utilitarianism. However, Kant needn't even defend his deontological ethical theory against Bentham's contextually based argument because the different dimensions of utilitarianism, act versus rule, collapse this counter argument in upon itself with no effort on Kant's part. Bentham, an act utilitarian, believes in the consideration of circumstance, in comparison to Mill, a rule utilitarian, whose views virtually align with and support Kant's concept of the categorical imperative, the ability to will the maxim of an action becoming universal law. Mill's view shares a structural similarity to Kant. Rule utilitarianism is essentially based on the idea that if everyone followed the rule, that is, if it were universal, it would maximize utility. Although somewhat different in end goal, with Kant's basis for morality grounded in good will and Mill's in the interests of every individual in harmony to the whole, which has already been dismissed on the premises of moral law, both possess the aim of application to all circumstances. Therefore rule utilitarianism disbands act utilitarianism's argument of contextual impact on the morality of actions.

Despite other theories of morality, Kant's deontological view prevails because it is based in rationality in a way others are not. It embodies three separate areas of philosophy: physics, ethics, and logic, provides a pure analysis of these concepts, and allows them to be applied to our experiences. Kant's view also does not advocate the consideration of actions themselves, but rather our thought processes and motivations for those

actions. Instead of focusing on one's behavior and the utility it does or does not produce and adjusting accordingly, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* promotes introspection within an individual. This allows for the modification of one's behavior based on the concept of freedom of will and the desire for that will to be intrinsically good. Kant's deontological theory should be considered the standard by which we base all moral decisions because it permits the evolution of moral capacity within one's self that is necessary in order to develop true righteousness.

Sources Cited Bentham, Jeremy. *The Principle Of Utility*. N. p.: n. p., n. d. Print. Mill, John S. *Utilitarianism*. N. p.: n. p., n. d. Print. Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. N. p.: n. p., n. d. Print.