

---

# DEONTOLOGY

---

## The Strengths and Weaknesses of Rule Based Ethics



If we regard human actions as consisting of three parts, then the main difference between these moral theories has to do with which part they believe to be the most important consideration when thinking about ethics.

The three parts of human action are:

1. The **nature and character of the person** performing the action.
2. The nature of the **action itself**.
3. The **consequences** of the action.

Immanuel Kant (1774-1804). One of the most brilliant philosophical minds of the modern era, Kant established a universal ethic, *Deontology*, using rationality as a foundation.

---

The three moral theories can be distinguished in this way:

1. **Virtue ethics** focuses on the **nature and character of the person** performing the action.
2. **Deontological ethics** focuses on the **action itself**.
3. **Consequentialism** focuses on the **consequences** of the action.

## Quick Facts:

- Deontological theories of morality are **not** saying that we should disregard the consequences when making decisions. They are also **not** saying that utilitarian reasoning is a bad thing; far from it. What they **are** saying is that we have certain duties and obligations that override our concerns about the consequences. As long as we are respecting those duties, reasoning in terms of better and worse outcomes can be perfectly appropriate.
- Probably the earliest form of a deontological ethics is the 10 commandments in the Old Testament.

## It's Not Just True For You: The Categorical Imperative

- “Categorical” means it is absolute and unconditional, independent of anything else (such as inclinations or purposes).
- The opposite of this is “hypothetical”, which means “if some other condition obtains” (like when we say, “Hypothetically speaking, if worse came to worse we would want to make sure we have a backup plan.”). For instance, in the above example, it is imperative to study if you want a good grade. If you don’t care about a bad grade, and don’t see any other value in studying, then the “hypothetical” doesn’t obtain and you have no reason to study.
- Similarly, the principle of utility is a hypothetical imperative: it says that certain actions must be done if they lead to the greatest happiness for the greatest number; if that action doesn’t lead to the greatest happiness, then it shouldn’t be done.

**“The death of dogma is the birth of morality.”**

-IMMANUEL KANT

A “categorical imperative”, then, is something that must be done, no matter what; there is no “if”. It is a duty.

Kant thinks all “categorical imperatives” can be boiled down to a one, \*the\* Categorical Imperative, which is usually capitalized. When we take both of these things together, we arrive at the “Supreme Principle of Morality,” which Kant calls *the* Categorical Imperative:

I ought never to act in such a way that I couldn’t also will that the maxim on which I act should be a universal law.