

Kantian Deontology

by John Lumsden



WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will begin our exploration of another ethical theory, Kantian deontology. Some of the distinctive features of this position will be presented, as well as some of its core concepts. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. [Introducing Deontology](#)
2. [Kantian Deontology and Intentions](#)
3. [Kantian Deontology and Pure Reason](#)
4. [The Categorical Imperative](#)

1. Introducing Deontology

Ethics can evaluate actions in lots of different ways. One way is to say that an action is good if its outcome is desirable and bad if its outcome is undesirable. Utilitarians think this is the way we should do it. Deontologist disagree.

They think we should evaluate an action by whether or not it meets a certain standard or norm. In other words, it says there are some things that are simply right to do (and some that are simply wrong to do), no matter what happens after that.

When we do something just because it's the right thing to do, we often say we are doing our duty. There is a standard, code, or law we feel we need to live up to, in order to be good people. This way of thinking about ethics is already contained in the word deontology itself. That's because it derives from the Greek terms *deon* (meaning duty) and *logos* (meaning study or account of). Literally then, **deontology** means the study of duty.



TERM TO KNOW

Deontology

A family of ethical theories that maintains that the value of the action is determined by something intrinsic to the act itself.

2. Kantian Deontology and Intentions

There are many different versions of deontology, but the most influential is the one proposed by one of the most important German philosophers, Immanuel Kant, and is known as **Kantian deontology**.

Not only does Kant think that the consequences of an action don't tell us about its moral worth, he thinks that, even if we fail to do the right thing, we are still good, as long as we intended to do the right thing.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Imagine you borrow my copy of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, with every intention of returning it as I gave it to you. But as you're on your way to give it back to me, some philosophical fanatic mugs you. I've lost out on my book, but your moral worth is still the same.

As you can see, even if things turn out badly, it's your intentions that matter. But you should be careful here. This doesn't mean you can just have good intentions without trying to actually act on those intentions. As Kant puts it, your intention can't be a "mere wish"; you need to undertake the "greatest efforts" to bring your intentions about. In the above example, you really did try to give my book back; you failed through no fault of your own.



TERM TO KNOW

Kantian Deontology

A form of deontology that places absolute moral value in the agent's intent.

3. Kantian Deontology and Pure Reason

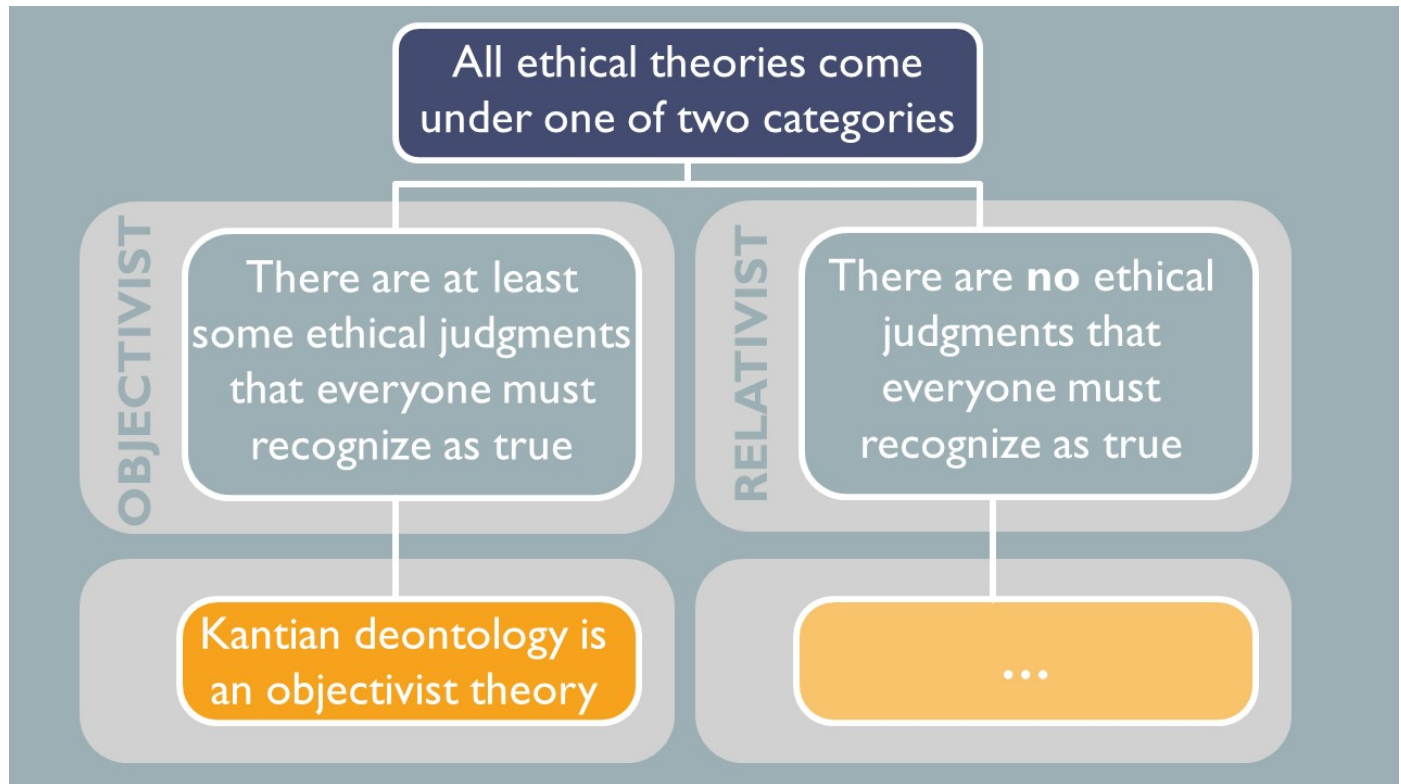
Kant argued that pure reason is the best guide for finding out what's right. It's pure because it isn't mixed with anything that's specific to particular people.



HINT

If pure reason were something like a special ability, then it would be dependent on circumstances (e.g. on natural talents or expensive education). But Kant claims we can all hear pure reason's demands—even if we don't always listen to them.

If you think back to the two main types of ethical theory, you can probably guess which Kant's belongs to.



4. The Categorical Imperative

Kant refers to pure reason's demands as the moral law. We know that the demands or imperatives that come from this law can't be based on any particular person's desires or circumstances. In other words, the imperative can't be qualified or conditioned by anything. An imperative of this kind is called **categorical imperative**.

If you obey the moral law by willing to do the right thing, then it doesn't matter what the consequences are.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine you have a child who shows an interest in myths and history. You decide that you should encourage your child's interests and their intellectual development (e.g. reading skills, broadening knowledge, etc).

This could have good or bad consequences. On the one hand, your child might grow up to be an accomplished and respected expert in a field they love. On the other hand, they might grow to hate this and wish they had spent their time learning a more practical skill.

However it turns out, your action is still good since it was motivated by respect for the moral law. That is, you did it because encouraging your child to develop their skills in itself good. In other words, it's inherently or intrinsically good.

TERM TO KNOW

Categorical Imperative

A concept in Kantian deontology that fulfills the role of a moral law that is binding on all people in all circumstances.

SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by **introducing deontology** as a family of ethical theories that values the goodness of an act over the goodness of the results of that act. Then we looked at **Kantian deontology and intentions**, focusing on how this version of deontology makes your will or intention central to ethical evaluation.

Then the relationship between **Kantian deontology and pure reason** was shown to establish the universality of the moral law and therefore make Kant's ethics objectivist. Finally, we saw that Kant calls this moral law **the categorical imperative** because it's a demand to act morally without any exception.



TERMS TO KNOW

Categorical Imperative

A concept in Kantian Deontology that fulfills the role of a moral law that is binding on all people in all circumstances.

Deontology

A family of ethical theories that maintains that the value of the action is determined by something intrinsic to the act itself.

Kantian Deontology

A form of Deontology that places absolute moral value in the agent's intent.