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## THE FOUNDATIONAL IDEAS OF IMMANUEL KANT'S DEONTOLOGY THEORY: AN OVERVIEW

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### Abstract:

Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics, rooted in the principle of duty, offers a foundational framework for moral philosophy that emphasizes the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of actions, independent of their consequences. Central to Kant's theory is the concept of the *categorical imperative*, a universal moral law that demands individuals act only according to maxims that could be willed as universal laws. This rationalist approach places moral worth on the intention behind actions, particularly when guided by duty rather than inclination. Kant asserts that humans, as autonomous rational agents, possess inherent dignity and should always be treated as ends in themselves, never merely as means. His deontology laid the groundwork for modern ethical discourse by establishing objectivity, universality, and respect for human autonomy as essential components of moral action. Through this foundation, Kant challenges consequentialist views and provides a compelling vision of morality anchored in reason, freedom, and moral law.

**Key Words:** Deontological, Moral Law, Categorical Imperative, Kant Challenges

### Introduction

Immanuel Kant, an 18th-century German philosopher, is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in Western moral philosophy. His deontological ethical theory, often referred to as Kantian ethics, offers a rigorous framework grounded in duty, rationality, and the inherent dignity of human beings. Unlike consequentialist theories, which evaluate morality based on the outcomes of actions, Kant's deontology asserts that the rightness or wrongness of actions depends on whether they adhere to moral duties and principles, regardless of the consequences they produce.

At the heart of Kant's moral philosophy lies the concept of the *categorical imperative*, a universal moral law derived from reason that commands actions which could be willed as a universal law for all rational beings. This notion emphasizes the autonomy of the moral agent and the idea that moral obligations arise from rational will, not external pressures or personal inclinations.

This overview seeks to explore the foundational ideas of Kant's deontology, focusing on key concepts such as duty, the good will, moral law, and the categorical imperative. By examining these principles, the paper aims to provide a clear understanding of Kant's vision of moral action as grounded in reason, respect for persons, and the pursuit of universal moral law.

There is an influential ethical approach that is called deontological. The words deontology is derived from the Greek words for duty (deon) and science (or study) of (logos). In contemporary moral philosophy, deontology is one of those kinds of normative theories regarding which choices are morally required, forbidden, or permitted. In other words, deontology falls within the domain of moral theories that guide and assess our choice of what we ought to do (Deontic theories), in contrast to virtue theories. Fundamentally deontological theory is meant to guide and assess what kind of person (in terms of character traits) we are and should be. And within that domain, deontology, those who subscribe to deontological theories of morality stand in opposition to consequential theories. Deontological theories judge the states of affairs those agents. Deontologists of all types hold that some choices cannot be justified by their effects-that no matter how morally good their



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consequences are some choices are morally forbidden. On deontological accounts of morality, agents cannot make certain wrong choice even if by doing so the number of wrong choices will be minimized. For deontologists, what makes a choice right is its conformity with moral norms. Such norms are to be simply obeyed by each moral agent, such norm keepings are not to be maximized by each agent. In this sense, for deontologists, the right has priority over the good. If an act is not in accordance with the right, it may not be undertaken, no matter the good that it might produce. Kant developed the deontological ethical systems that are measured by rightness of the rules rather than the end results. Kant stressed the importance of basic rules or principles that governed the decisions. He believed in good will. The moral person should have good will and that he takes ethical decisions based on what is right. He does not regard the consequences of his decision. The decision maker should discharge his duty. The question arises here what is right? Kant proposed the decision making by universal laws or universal truths which he called categorical imperatives.

### Kant's Universalism and Categorical Imperatives

Discussion of the people and importance of duty have mostly taken place in the context of a debate between deontological and consequentialist theories of morality that advocate that certain acts can be judged to be right or wrong in themselves. Kant's own view provides an example of such a theory. In contrast, a consequentialist theory holds that the rightness or wrongness of an act is to be judged in terms of the consequences that it produces. An example of a consequentialist theory would be the argument that every action ought to maximize happiness and minimize unhappy states of affairs. John Rawls and Charles argued that the concepts of right and duty ought to be central to any moral theory, while utilitarian such as R.M.Hare and other consequentialists, argued that duties are important only in so far as they indicate those acts which promote good state of affairs. Alasdair McIntyre and Bernard Williams, say that moral philosophy has the right to concern itself more with a description of the conditions of human life and less with traditional concepts of duty and obligation. There is a great insight of Kant regarding morality based on universalisability which says that we should not carve out exceptions for ourselves. What we do should be able to be done by everyone. To understand the concept of universalisability we need to understand that there is a moral law which obliges everyone. Each and every one experiences obligation as per duty. We may have obligation. The only way to explain why humans think that they have to live up to certain obligation is that there is a universal moral law which commands or orders or demands that everyone line up to their duties. Before we understand the categorical imperative, first of all let me analyse what is imperative in general? We can see Kant's account of imperatives in its proper perspectives only when we have grasped his theory of the subjective and objective principles of practical reason and of their relation to different kinds of goodness. The objective principles of practical reason need not also be subjective principles, that is, they need not be the maxims on which we act. Our practical experience arises from the fact that our inclinations may be 'obstacles and hindrances' to practical reason. The objective principles of practical reason are always principles of some kind of goodness appear to us as principles of obligation, such as, in the form of as commands or imperatives. The objective principles thus appear as commands or imperatives. A command is wholly external, whereas the objective principles of practical reason are manifestations of our own rational nature. Morality can be mere obedience to the commands of the state or even of God. Nevertheless the affinity between obligation and command is shown by the common tendency to express moral and other obligations using the imperative mood. Kant's definition of an imperative is as follows: "The conception of an objective principle, so far as it is necessitation for a will, is called a command (of reason), and the formula of the command is called an imperative".

The categorical imperative or command is the universal moral law, which means that it is categorical, unyielding, and it is demanding. It doesn't allow for excuses and hence it is unconditional. Categorical imperatives must be compared to hypothetical imperative or command. A hypothetical imperative is a conditional imperative. It commands a certain kind of behaviour only if you want to achieve some goal. Example "You can expect a good harvest if you seed the soil properly and timely". But if you don't want a good harvest, then there is no need to seed the soil properly and timely. The hypothesis here is an imperative whose force depends on our having the appropriate desire. This can be seen from the following imaginary dialogue." If you want to run in the London Marathon, you ought to state training. This is hypothetical imperative. "But I



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don't want to run in the London Marathons." Well in that case, you have no reason to start training".<sup>33</sup> There are two kinds of hypothetical imperatives which Kant calls, technical imperative means the chosen end and the other is assessor imperative means to have same thing. Assessor imperatives appeal to desire that human beings tend naturally to share health and happiness. The assessor imperatives are carrying more general force than hypothetical imperatives do.

### Understanding Duty based Ethics

Duty-based ethics are labeled deontological by philosophers. Some explanation is in order. The etymology of deontology reveals that 'deon', comes from the Greek word which means obligatory or necessary. Generally speaking 'de'- means 'of' and 'ont' pertains to 'being' so we are ultimately speaking about something being necessary based upon "the way things are". 'Logy' comes from the Greek logos and pertains to both speech and theory, hence our word logic. The word deontological pertains to theory of binding duty or obligation. Such theories are also called 'a priori' in that they are based upon knowledge gained prior to experience. No concrete lived-through experience is required in order to derive these duties deductively from reason.

### Deontological Ethics

Deontological ethical theory concerns with duty. As per the Kant's principle, people behave ethically as they find that it is their solemn duty to do so. The duty of the parents is to protect the life and interests of their children independent of consequences. Parents must take appropriate measures for that. As given in the example, Prince Alex and Daniel Raj are small

children under the care of his parents. It is first and foremost duty of his father and mother to see that Prince Alex and Daniel Raj survive. They need to save the life of Prince Alex Daniel Raj from any evil. Their main concern is to save their sons and thus should be their primary duty. They should do it not for any other considerations. Since, the parent's duty is to try to save the life of their minor offspring; they do that without having any expectation or the consequences. This theory is based on the concept of duty. As per Kant, ethics does not depend upon intuition or emotion; rather it depends upon rational basis of the interaction. The concept of "good will" plays a cardinal role in the framework of Kant. People having good will are motivated to do the right thing towards others without expecting any consequences or results. Kant also claims three types of reasons in the light of which a person performs his duty. **There are:**

- A person may do his duty out of self-interest. He does what is right and not because that he enjoys in doing it. He does it because it will get him something that he wants.
- A person may carry out his duty motivated by direct inclination, that is, by the immediate satisfaction or pleasure it gives him.
- A person may do something simply because he believes that it is the correct thing to do and, there is, conforms to the moral standards.

We are in the two different worlds which are called the phenomenal and the noumenal world. In phenomenal world what happens is recorded, registered by the human sense of experiences that he accumulates through living the life of human being. The noumenon world is the world of ought and should. The individual enjoy a pure life through giving moral reasons extended to their logical ends. The noble action remains noble or not depending upon the nature and objective behind the action itself. The action ceases to be noble if it is initiated basically to satisfy the selfish interests of the person. If action is initiated from the sense of duty or from a moral will that could be branded by a good will and an action with adequate and proper goodwill make one noble

### 1. The Good Will

Kant posited that the only thing inherently good is the "good will." According to him, a good will is intrinsically valuable, not because of its outcomes but due to its volition. He stated, "A good will is good not because of what it effects or



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accomplishes, not because of its fitness to attain some intended end, but good just by its willing, i.e., in itself."

## 2. Duty and Moral Law

Central to Kant's ethics is the concept of duty. He argued that moral actions are those performed out of duty, guided by moral law, rather than influenced by personal inclinations or desires. This perspective underscores that the morality of an action is determined by its adherence to a rule or principle, not by its consequences.

## 3. The Categorical Imperative

Kant introduced the "categorical imperative" as the foundational principle of morality. Unlike hypothetical imperatives, which are conditional and based on personal desires (e.g., "If I want to pass the exam, I must study"), the categorical imperative is unconditional and must be followed regardless of personal goals. It commands actions that are necessary in themselves, reflecting universal moral law.

## 4. Formulations of the Categorical Imperative

Kant proposed several formulations of the categorical imperative, two of which are particularly prominent:

- **The Formula of Universal Law:** "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." This means one should only act according to principles that could be universally applied.
- **The Formula of Humanity:** "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means." This emphasizes treating individuals as ends in themselves and not solely as means to an end.

## 5. Autonomy and Moral Agency

Kant believed that moral agents possess autonomy—the capacity to legislate moral law for themselves through reason. This autonomy is the basis for moral responsibility, as individuals are seen as self-governing beings who can discern and commit to moral duties.

Kant's deontological ethics has profoundly influenced moral philosophy, highlighting the importance of duty, the intrinsic morality of actions, and the role of rationality in ethical decision-making.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics provides a profound and rigorous moral framework grounded in reason, autonomy, and duty. Central to this theory is the **categorical imperative**, which demands that moral actions be guided by maxims that can be universally willed and that individuals always be treated as ends in themselves, never merely as means. Kant's emphasis on the **intrinsic worth of human beings** and the **objectivity of moral law** sets his philosophy apart from consequentialist theories, placing moral rightness in the *intention* behind actions rather than their outcomes.

This analysis has highlighted how Kant's foundational ideas—autonomy, duty, good will, and universality—form a cohesive ethical system that champions moral responsibility and rational agency. While not without criticism, especially in its perceived rigidity and occasional conflict with practical outcomes, Kantian ethics remains a cornerstone of modern moral philosophy. Its insistence on the **moral equality and dignity of all persons** continues to resonate in contemporary debates on justice, human rights, and ethical decision-making.



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Ultimately, Kant's deontology challenges us to act not out of inclination or consequence but from a commitment to moral principles that respect the rational nature of ourselves and others. It offers a timeless call to uphold integrity, reason, and humanity in all moral deliberation.

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