

## 2.5: Deontology - Ethics as Duty

### Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain Immanuel Kant's concept of duty and the categorical imperative
- Differentiate between utilitarianism and deontology
- Apply a model of Kantian business ethics

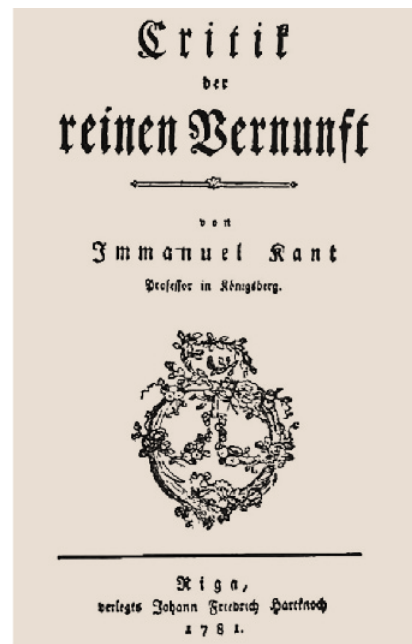
Unlike Bentham and Mill, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was not concerned with consequences of one's actions or the harm caused to one's individual interests. Instead, he focused on motives and the willingness of individuals to act for the good of others, even though that action might result in personal loss. Doing something for the right reason was much more important to Kant than any particular outcome.

### Aroused From “Dogmatic Slumber”

In 1781, at the age of fifty-six years, Kant published *Critique of Pure Reason* (*Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*) in Königsberg, Prussia (Figure 2.9).<sup>51</sup> Almost immediately, it transformed him from an obscure professor of metaphysics and logic into a preeminent figure in the world of philosophy. In the 800-page tome, Kant criticized the way rationalism (“pure reason”) had assumed the mantle of absolute truth, supplanting both religious faith and empirical science. Kant referred to the unquestioned acceptance of rationalism as *dogmatism*. Whether Christian or revolutionary, dogmatic thinking was to be avoided because it obscured the truths of science and religion through flawed logic.



(a)



(b)

Figure 2.5.9: First published in 1781, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* provided a new system for understanding experience and reality. It defended religious faith against atheism and the scientific method against the skepticism of the Enlightenment. (credit a: modification of “Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)” by “Daube aus Böblingen”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain; credit b: modification of “Title page of 1781 edition of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*” by “Tomisti”/Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Kant credited the skepticism of empirical philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) with awakening him from “dogmatic slumber,” although he disagreed with Hume, who claimed that the mind did not exist at all but was the result of mental associations derived from sensory experience.<sup>52</sup> For Kant, reality could be discerned not through reasoning or sensory experience alone but only by

understanding the nature of the human mind. Kant argued that sensory experience did not create the mind but rather that the mind created experience through its internal structures. And within the mind's complex structures there also existed an inherent and unconditional duty to act ethically, which Kant called the "categorical imperative," first outlined in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785).<sup>53</sup>

In its initial form, Kant's described his concept of the **categorical imperative** as follows: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law."<sup>54</sup> Kant's categorical (or unconditional) imperative has practical applications for the study of ethics. The categorical imperative contains two major suppositions: (1) We must act on the basis of goodwill rather than purely on self-interested motives that benefit ourselves at the expense of others; (2) we must never treat others as means toward ends benefitting ourselves without consideration of them also as ends in themselves. Kant held that observing the categorical imperative as we consider what actions to take would directly lead to ethical actions on our part.

#### link to learning

Watch this [video about the categorical imperative](#) to learn more.

How do you see the imperative working in your own life? Within your family? In your personal and professional relationships? Does Kant's understanding of the relationship between art and beauty accord with your own?

In Kant's view, rationalism and empiricism prevented people from perceiving the truth about their own nature. What was that truth? What was sufficient to constitute it? Kant identified an a priori world of knowledge and understanding in which truth lay in the structures and categories of the mind that were beyond perception and reason. This was a radical concept for the times.

In the end, Kant's systematic analysis of knowing and understanding provided a much-needed counterweight to the logic of Enlightenment rationalism. The existence of the mental structures he proposed has even been confirmed today. For instance, the scientific consensus is that humans are born with cognitive structures designed specifically for language acquisition and development. Even more surprising, there may be similar cognitive structures for morality, conscience, and moral decision-making.<sup>55</sup> So, it is quite possible that conscience, if not happiness, may have a genetic component after all, although Kant himself did not believe the categories of the understanding or the a priori structures of the mind were biological.

#### link to leARNING

Read [a good survey of Kant's critique of Enlightenment rationalism and of empiricism](#) in this article.

## Utilitarianism and Deontology

From a Kantian perspective, it is clear that adherence to duty is what builds the framework for ethical acts. This is in direct contradiction of Bentham's view of human nature as selfish and requiring an objective calculus for ethical action to result. Kant rejected the idea of such a calculus and believed, instead, that perceptions were organized into preexisting categories or structures of the mind. Compare his notion of an ordered and purposeful universe of laws with the similar *logos*, or logic, of the ancient Greeks. One of those laws included implementation of the categorical imperative to act ethically, in accordance with our conscience. However, even though that imperative ought to be followed without exception, not everyone does so. In Kant's moral teachings, individuals still had free will to accept or reject it.

There is a definite contrast between utilitarianism, even Mill's version, and Kant's system of ethics, known as deontology, in which duty, obligation, and good will are of the highest importance. (The word is derived from the Greek *deon*, meaning duty, and *logos* again, here meaning organization for the purpose of study.<sup>56</sup>) An ethical decision requires us to observe only the rights and duties we owe to others, and, in the context of business, act on the basis of a primary motive to do what is right by all stakeholders. Kant was not concerned with utility or outcome—his was not a system directed toward results. The question for him was not how to attain happiness but how to become worthy of it.

Rather like Aristotle and Confucius, Kant taught that the transcendent aspects of human nature, if followed, would lead us inevitably to treat people as ends rather than means. To be moral meant to renounce uninformed dogmatism and rationalism, abide by the categorical imperative, and embrace freedom, moral sense, and even divinity. This was not a lofty or unattainable goal in Kant's mind, because these virtues constituted part of the systematic structuring of the human mind. It could be accomplished by living truthfully or, as we say today, authentically. Such a feat transcended the logic of both rationalism and empiricism.

## WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

### Les Misérables

You may have seen the very popular Broadway show or movie *Les Misérables*, based on Victor Hugo's epic nineteenth-century French novel of the same name. The main character, Jean Valjean, steals a loaf of bread to feed his sister's starving family and is arrested and sent to prison. If we apply conventional reasoning and principles of law to his crime, Valjean genuinely is guilty as charged and we do not need to consider any extenuating circumstances. However, in a Kantian ethical framework, we would take into account Valjean's motives as well as his duty to treat his sister's family as ends in themselves who deserve to live. Valjean's fate demonstrates what might occur when there is a gap between the legal and the moral. Clearly, Valjean broke the law by stealing the bread. However, he acted morally by correcting a wrong and possibly saving human lives. According to Kantian ethics, Valjean may have been ethical in stealing bread for his family, particularly because the action was grounded in good will and provided benefit to others more than to himself.

### Critical Thinking

- It has been said that in Kantian ethics, duty comes before beauty and morality before happiness. Can you think of other instances when it is appropriate to break one moral code to satisfy another, perhaps greater one? What are the deciding factors in each case?
- What would you do if you were Jean Valjean?

### Kantian Business Ethics

Unlike utilitarianism, which forms the philosophical foundation for most cost-benefit analysis in business, Kantian ethics is not so easily applied. On one hand, it offers a unique opportunity for the development of individual morality through the categorical imperative to act ethically, which emphasizes humanity and autonomy.<sup>57</sup> This imperative addresses one major side of business ethics: the personal. Character and moral formation are crucial to creating an ethical culture. Indeed, business ethics is littered with cases of companies that have suffered damaging crises due to their leaders' lack of commitment to act on the basis of a good will and with regard for what benefits others. Recent examples include Uber, where a toxic work environment was allowed to prevail, and Volkswagen, which knowingly misrepresented the emissions level of its cars.<sup>58</sup> Such examples exist in government as well, as the recent Theranos and "Fat Leonard" scandals confirm.<sup>59</sup> The latter consisted of graft and corruption in the U.S. Navy's Pacific fleet and has been a continual source of embarrassment for an institution that prides itself on the honorable conduct of its officers. One person can make a difference, either positively or negatively.

On the other hand, Kant's categorical imperative is just that: categorical or unconditional. It calls for morally upright behavior regardless of external circumstance or the historical context of a proposed act or decision. Kant affirmed that "the moral law is an imperative, which commands categorically, because the law is unconditioned."<sup>60</sup> Unconditional ethics could be a challenge for a global organization dealing with suppliers, customers, and competitors in sometimes vastly different cultures. It raises a larger philosophical issue: namely, was Kant correct in believing that morality and mental categories are independent of experience? Or can they be culturally conditioned, and, if so, does that make them relative rather than absolute, as Kant believed them to be?

This question whether ethics is universal is distinctly Kantian, because Kant believed that not only must a moral agent act with others' interests in mind and have the right intentions, but also that the action be universally applicable. Think of how Kantian ethics might be applied not just on an individual level but throughout an organization, and then society. Kant would judge a corporate act to be ethical if it benefitted others at the same time it benefitted company leadership and stockholders, and if it did not place their interests above those of other stakeholders. If loyalty to a coworker conflicted with loyalty to a supervisor or the organization, for instance, then acts resulting from such loyalty might not meet the conditions of deontology. Either the supervisor or the company would be treated as a means rather than an end. Although the qualitative or humanizing element of Kantian ethics has broad appeal, it runs into limitations in an actual business setting. Whether the limitations have good or bad effects depends on the organization's culture and leadership. In general, however, most companies do not adhere to strict Kantian theories, because they look to the outcome of their decisions rather than focusing on motives or intentions.

## CASES FROM THE REAL WORLD

### Samsung

In the fall of 2016, Samsung Electronics experienced a massive public relations disaster when its Galaxy Note 7 smartphones started exploding due to faulty batteries and casings. Initially, the company denied there were any technical problems. Then, when

it became obvious the exploding phones posed a safety and health threat (they were banned from airplanes), Samsung accused its suppliers of creating the problem. In reality, the rush to beat Apple's iPhone 7 release date was the most likely reason corners were cut in production. Samsung finally owned up to the problem, recalled more than two million phones worldwide, and replaced them with new, improved Galaxy Note 7s.

The company's response and its replacement of the phones went a long way toward defusing the disaster and even boosting the company's share price. Whether management knew it, its response was Kantian. Samsung focused on the end (i.e., customer safety and satisfaction) with the motive of doing the ethically responsible thing. Although some might argue the company could have done far more and much more quickly, perhaps it still acted in accordance with the categorical imperative. What do you think?

### Critical Thinking

- How might the categorical imperative become a part of organizational culture? Could it ever work in business?
- Do you see the categorical imperative as applicable to your own interests and hope for a career?

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