

# **What's the Right Thing to Do?**

## **Part I: In Theory**

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# I Kant's *Groundwork*

Kant's goal: A purely rational foundation for morality.

The starting point

- There is a universal principle of nature, that is, a law that applies to all rational beings. Humans, however, are not only subject to natural laws, but also to self-imposed laws. We are rational beings, but we do not always act according to reason.
- A moral act is one that is done out of duty, not from inclination. The moral law—formulated as the categorical imperative—requires that we act only on maxims that we can will as universal laws.



# I Kant's *Groundwork*

**Kant's goal:** A **purely rational** foundation for morality.

## **The starting point:**

- There is a **universal moral law**, distinct from the empirical laws of nature, that governs the workings of a **perfectly good will**.
- Humans, possessing imperfectly good wills, are capable of obeying this law, but also capable of violating it. The moral law makes **commands** of us but we **don't always follow them**.
- A moral action is an action performed from **respect for the moral law**—from **duty**.

# I Kant's *Groundwork*

## The question:

Taking for granted the existence of a universal moral law, what can be inferred from the mere fact of its existence about the content of its commands?

## Kant's answer:

The commands of a universal moral law must take the form of **categorical imperatives**—imperatives that apply **unconditionally** and **necessarily** to **all** rational beings.

The moral force of a categorical imperative does not depend on the **contingent circumstances** of any particular rational being, and does not depend on any **other, more fundamental law**.

# I Kant's *Groundwork*

**“There is, therefore, only a single categorical imperative and it is this:**

***act only according to that maxim [guiding principle or rule] through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”***

## **Kant's argument?**

- All other putative categorical imperatives (e.g. act in accordance with God's will, promote happiness, be kind, etc.) cannot be truly categorical.
- Their moral force rests on further conditions outside of themselves, so they cannot be expressions of a moral law that holds necessarily for all rational beings.

# I Kant's *Groundwork*

“There is, therefore, only a single categorical imperative and it is this:

*act only according to that maxim [guiding principle or rule]*

when I think of a *categorical* imperative I know at once what it contains. For since besides the law the imperative contains only the necessity of the maxim<sup>†</sup> to conform with this law, whereas the law contains no condition to which

it was limited, nothing is left but the universality of a law as such, with which the maxim of the action ought to conform, and it is this conformity alone that the imperative actually represents as necessary.

- ...and the only command that can be derived from the universality of the moral law alone, with no other assumptions, is the command to act in ways that can be universally followed.

# I Kant's *Groundwork*

“There is, therefore, only a single categorical imperative and it is this:

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## Kant's argument?

- All other putative categorical imperatives (e.g. act in accordance with God's will, promote happiness, be kind, etc.) cannot be truly **categorical**.
- Their moral force rests on **further conditions outside of themselves**, so they cannot be expressions of a moral **law** that holds **necessarily** for **all rational beings**.

# I Kant's *Groundwork*

“There is, therefore, only a single categorical imperative and it is this:

*act only according to that maxim [guiding principle or rule] through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”*

## Kant's argument?

- A truly **unconditional** command cannot rest on assumptions about the nature of the good. It must instead derive from the essential feature of the moral law *qua* law—its **universality**...
- ...and the only command that can be derived from the **universality** of the moral law alone, with **no other assumptions**, is the command to act in ways that can be universally followed.



# I Kant's *Groundwork*

## The categorical imperative in practice:

**Q:** Is it wrong to make a false promise to get someone to give you money?

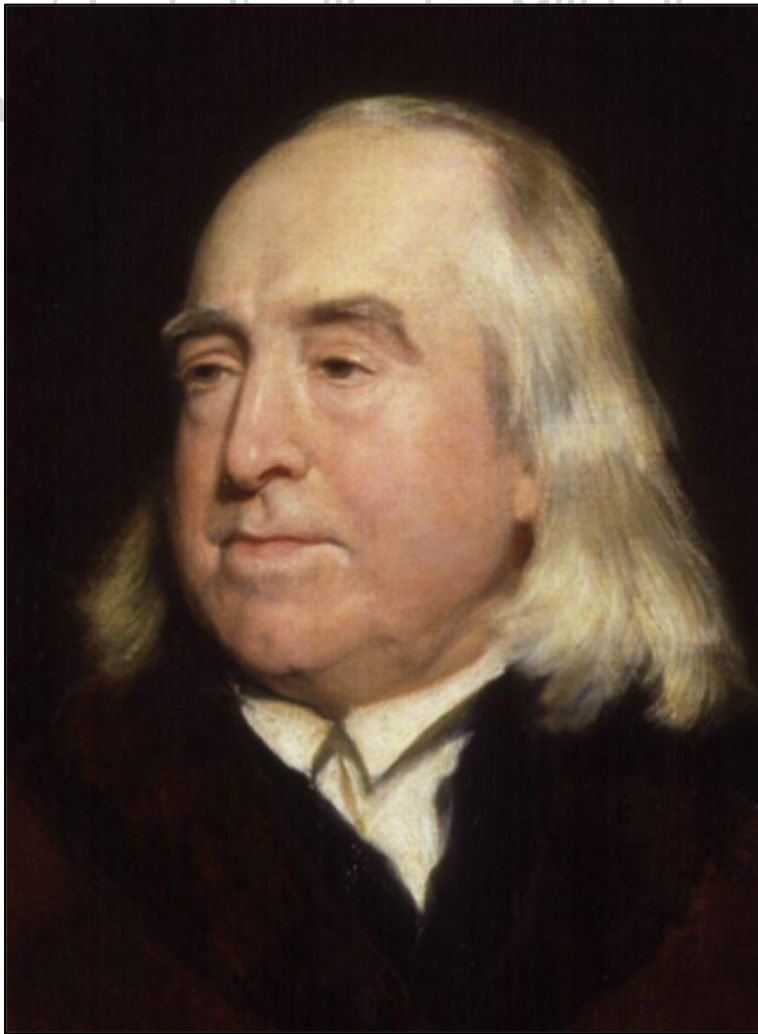
**A:** Yes—because the practice of making false promises to get someone to give you money, **if universally followed**, would **undermine the conditions for its own success**.

## The “murderer at the door” problem:

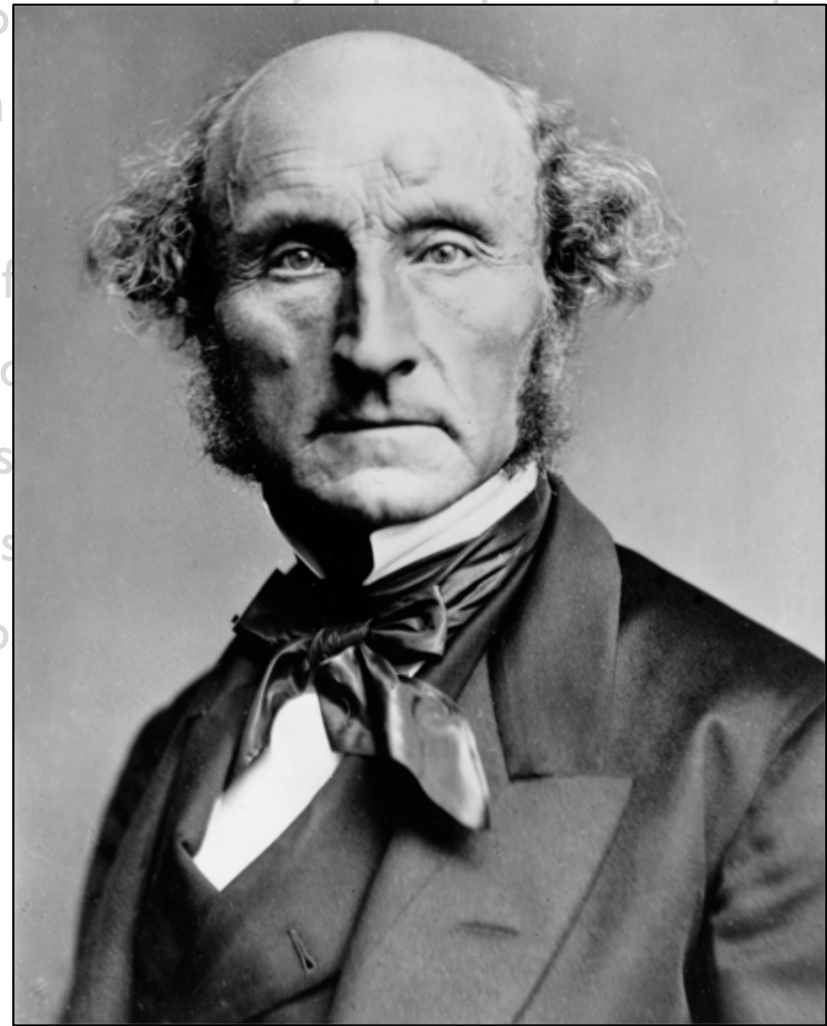
- According to Kant, one implication of the categorical imperative is an **absolute prohibition on lying**.
- Lying cannot be willed to be a universal law, because universal lying would undermine the conditions for its own success.
- This still applies, says Kant, even if a murderer knocks on your door and asks whether his intended victim is in the house.

## 2 Mill's *Utilitarianism*

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## 2 Mill's *Utilitarianism*

As a (classical) **utilitarian**, Mill believes consequences for happiness are at the heart of all ethics. The classical utilitarian hypothesis: **goodness = happiness**.

“The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that **actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness**. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.”

(Mill 1863, Ch. 2)

## 2 Mill's *Utilitarianism*

### What does Mill mean by pleasure?

- Mill's conception of pleasure is a broad one—it includes “pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiment” and “a sense of dignity” (Ch. 2).
- Moreover, “It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact, that **some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others**” (Ch. 2).
- Trade-offs between types of pleasure, and between pleasure and pain, in the calculation of happiness are to be left to “**the feelings and judgment of the experienced**”.

## 2 Mill's *Utilitarianism*

### Why accept that goodness=happiness?

*Mill's (notorious) argument:*

“No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that **each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness.** This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it is possible to require, that happiness is a good: that **each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.**” (Ch. 4)

## 2 Mill's *Utilitarianism*

### The demandingness problem

- Normally, we take it to be at least **morally permissible** to pursue projects that **don't** aim at maximizing the general happiness.
- But utilitarianism denies this—it permits only those projects that can be justified as happiness-maximizing from a **completely impartial viewpoint**.
- It seems to require we spend all our time either helping to alleviate suffering or making money to give to charities to alleviate suffering.

## 2 Mill's *Utilitarianism*

### Ivan's question

Ivan Karamazov, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*:

“Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that **it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature**—that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?”

One of the most persistent, and most troubling, criticisms of utilitarianism is that it seems to **demand** brutal sacrifices when they are necessary for the maximization of the general happiness.

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### **Next time:**

How do these grand moral theories apply to **real-world moral dilemmas?**

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