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DO THE RIGHT THING - DEONTOLOGY

Kant do it!

Kant do it!

There are a lot of deontological moral philosophers out there. But none have been more influential than a dude by the name of Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804). And so we are going to spend a bit of time looking at some of Kant's ideas. At the very heart of Kant's moral philosophy was a thing (a rule) that he called a "*Categorical Imperative*".

Categorical = *unconditional*;

Imperative = *command*.

So a categorical imperative is an *unconditional command*. Do the right thing – unconditionally. This was in a sense Kant's answer to what would a *right* rule would look like.

But how to define these categorical imperatives? Do we look to our God whoever that may be? That's the route many of us would follow. Not Kant though. Kant decided to go it alone. In fact, he argued that our moral knowledge is the only real basis which we have to argue for religious faith. Or if you like he argued that in order to be able to recognize some sort of higher order, we would have to recognize the difference between right and wrong intrinsically.

But that is an aside really. Getting back to categorical imperatives, Kant actually went so far as to formulate no less than five versions of categorical imperatives:

- The formula of universal law;
- The formula of a universal law of nature;
- The formula of humanity as an end in itself;
- The formula of autonomy;
- The formula of the Kingdom of Ends;

I'm only really telling you this detail to sound clever though 🙂. We are just going to look at Kant's most famous formulation – the *formula of universal law*.

This categorical imperative went as follows:

"*Act only on that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*" (Kant 1785 cited in http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/ - accessed February 2012)

What the heck is a *maxim*???!

The best way to explain it is by giving you a general form of a maxim. That would look like this:

"I will *A* when *C* in order to achieve *E*"

Where:

A – is some act e.g. stealing sweet potatoes and melons

C – is some circumstance e.g. I'm hungry

E – is some type of end e.g. feeling stuffed!

So in our story Baboon followed the maxim:

"I will **steal sweet potatoes and melons** (A) when **I'm hungry** (C) in order to achieve **feeling stuffed** (E)!"

Ok, now that we know what a maxim is, we can get back to Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative: "*Act only on that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*" What this formulation really provides is a protocol or decision procedure for examining the morality of certain acts. We can unpack this protocol as follows:

Step 1: State your proposed act as a maxim;

Step 2: Restate this maxim as a universal law;

Step 3: Ask whether your maxim is conceivable in a world ruled by the universal law; and finally

Step 4: Ask whether you would rationally act on your maxim in such a world.

Only if the maxim passes through all four steps can it be said to be moral. So let's do this for our story. In fact we

Only if the maxim passes through all four steps can it be said to be moral. So let's do this for our story. In fact we have already stated Baboon's act as a maxim:

Step 1: "I will steal sweet potatoes and melons when I'm hungry in order to achieve feeling stuffed!"

Step 2: "All rational animals in the jungle will steal sweet potatoes and melons all the time and will always feel stuffed"

Step 3: In all likelihood if all the animals are stealing sweet potatoes and melons all the time they will soon run out and so it is highly likely that Baboon's original maxim is not conceivable in a world ruled by the universal law.

In other words Baboon's maxim fails at step 3 and cannot be considered to be moral. A failure at Step 3 would result in what Kant referred to as a *perfect* duty to refrain from acting on this maxim.

What about **Step 4**?

Well imagine the animals lived in a jungle which essentially had a limitless food store. In this world, it would not be inconceivable that all the animals would be able to "steal sweet potatoes and melons when they're hungry in order to achieve feeling stuffed". So the Maxim would pass Step 3.

But I imagine that after a while overindulgence would to get the better of Baboon. Eventually he's going to start getting indigestion, or acid reflux, or Baboon gout. Not to mention increasing his chance of getting heart disease, hypertension or diabetes. In other words, in all likelihood, in a world governed by the maxim in step 2, baboon would soon stop acting on his own maxim. Or if you like it would fail at Step 4. Kant called these failures at step 4 *imperfect* duties. You could apply them with some exceptions – like when you were feeling ill from eating too many sweet potatoes and melons!

And that is that! Well actually, that is what we are going to cover. If you want to check out more on Kant's ideas on ethics and morality go and have a look at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/.