

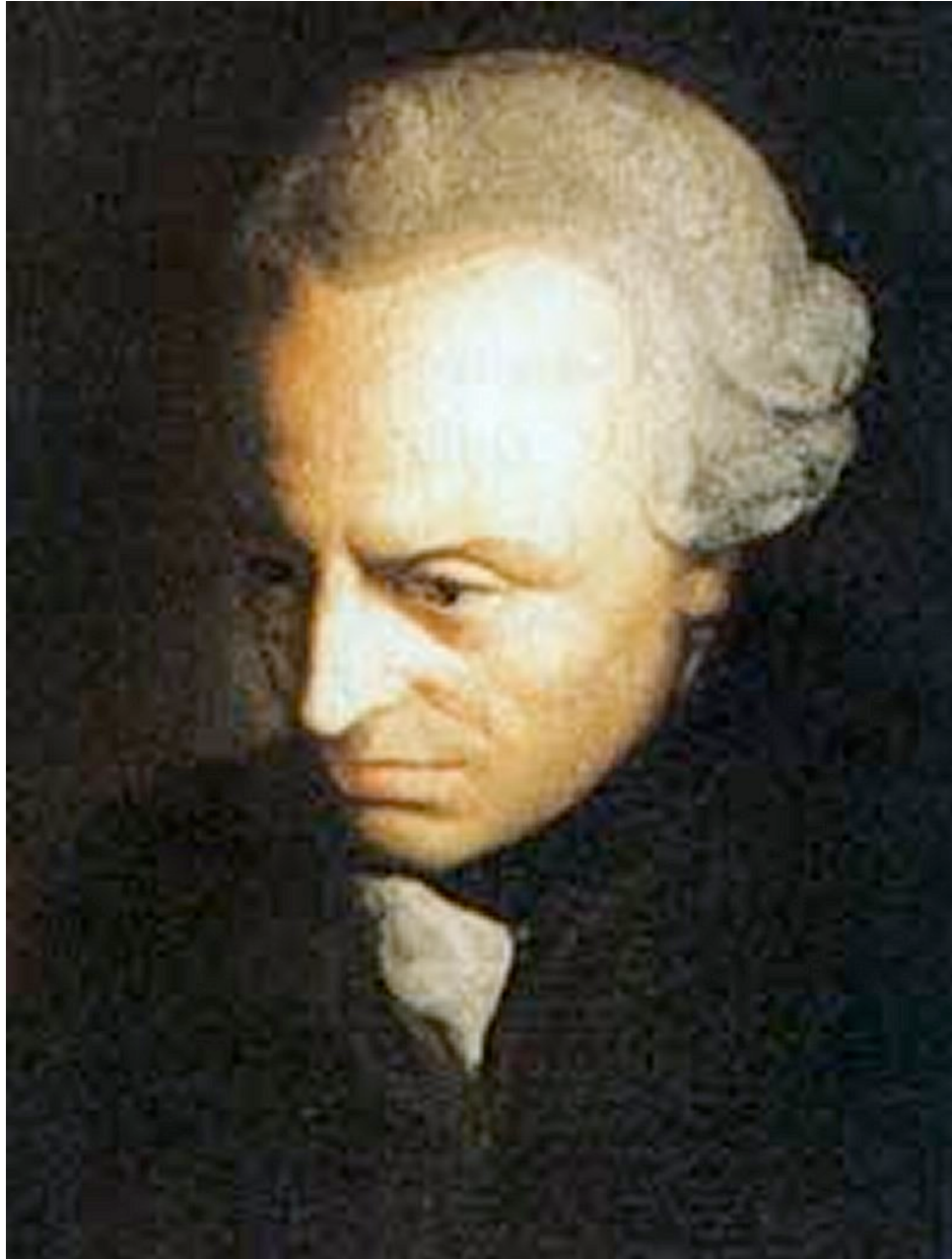
# Philosophy 1100: Ethics

## Topic 6: Kant's Categorical Imperative

1. Immanuel Kant
2. Kant's Categorical Imperative (KCI)
  - a. maxims
  - b. universalizability
  - c. examples
3. Problems for KCI
  - a. The Problem of Innocent-But-Non-Universalizable Maxims
  - b. The Problem of Subjectivism

# Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

- German philosopher; the greatest one
- wrote books in epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics
- led a very regimented life
- many famous doctrines, including:
  - that we can know some interesting things *a priori*, i.e., just by understanding and reflecting on them.
  - “absolute deontology”: that some kinds of action (e.g., lying) are *always* wrong, no matter what
- held curious views on sexual morality



**Immanuel Kant**  
(German philosopher, 1724-1804)

# 'How Bad For The Environment Can Throwing Away One Plastic Bottle Be?' 30 Million People Wonder

JANUARY 19, 2010 | ISSUE 46•03



A local resident discards a plastic bottle—just as he has done his whole life—with no perceivable effect on the environment.

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# Kant's Categorical Imperative

Some famous quotations from Kant:

“I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.”

(from passage 31 from our first Kant reading)

“Act as though the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature.” (p. 24 of second Kant reading)

# Kant's Categorical Imperative

KCI: an act is morally right if and only if its maxim is universalizable.

# maxims

The **maxim** of an act is the principle or general policy that the agent of the act is acting on when she/he performs the act.

Maxims take the following form:

“When \_\_\_\_\_ , I will \_\_\_\_\_ .”  
(situation) (action)

For example: “When I think myself in want of money, I will borrow money and promise to repay it, although I know that I never can do so.” - Kant (passage 71)

# other examples of maxims

“When I am asked by the government to pay taxes, I won’t pay.”

“When it is election day, I will vote.”

“When it is election day, I will skip voting and sleep in instead.”

“When it’s at all inconvenient to recycle a plastic bottle, I’ll throw it in the trash.”

“Whenever I just don’t feel like keeping a promise I’ve made, I won’t keep it.”



# universalizability

“Some actions are so constituted that their maxim can’t even be thought as a universal law of nature without contradiction ... .

...

With other actions, the maxim-made-universal-law is not in that way internally impossible, but it is still something that no-one could possibly will to be a universal law of nature, because such a will would contradict itself.”

- Kant (pp. 25-26)

# universalizability

The maxim of an act is **universalizable** just in case:

- (i) everyone *could* act on the maxim,      If (i) fails,  
we call that a  
“contradiction  
in conception.”
- AND
- (ii) the agent of the act would be *willing* to have  
everyone act on the maxim.

If (ii) fails, we call that a  
“contradiction in will.”

# Kant's Categorical Imperative

KCI: an act is morally right if and only if its maxim is universalizable.

KCI is saying that right actions are those that are done on principles (i) that *could* be acted on by everyone, and (ii) that the agent would be *willing* to have everyone act on.

# examples

## I. Income Tax Example

act: I cheat on my taxes this April

maxim: “When I am asked by the government to pay taxes, I won’t pay.”

Question: Is this maxim universalizable?

Answer: NO

For it’s not even true that everyone *could* act on this maxim (thus violating (i) above).

*Why not? ...*

Thus, the act is **WRONG** according to KCI.

# examples

## 2. Recycling Example

act: I throw away my plastic bottle in the trash for the sake of minor convenience

maxim: “When it’s at all inconvenient to recycle a plastic bottle, I’ll throw it in the trash.”

Question: Is this maxim universalizable?

Answer: NO

For *I’m not willing* to have everyone act on this maxim (thus violating (ii) above).

Thus, the act is **WRONG** according to KCI.

# examples

## 3. Voting Example

act: I vote this November

maxim: “When it is election day, I will vote.”

Question: Is this maxim universalizable?

Answer: YES

For (i) everyone *could* act on the maxim, AND

(ii) I would be *willing* to have everyone act on the maxim.

Thus, the act is RIGHT according to KCI.

this one has a  
“right answer”

# clicker question

**What matters, on KCI?**

**A.** that our actions have good results

**B.** that our actions be ones everyone would approve of

**C.** that our actions be done on principles everyone could act on

**D.** that our actions be in everyone's interest.

# Kant's Categorical Imperative

KCI: an act is morally right if and only if its maxim is universalizable.



# a recipe for applying KCI

someone performs, or might perform, some action ...

**Step 1:** Identify the *maxim* of the action.

**Step 2:** Determine whether this maxim is *universalizable*.

to do Step 2, do these sub-steps ...

# a recipe for applying KCI

Step 2a: determine whether it is even *possible* for everyone to act on the maxim.

If it's *not* possible, then the maxim is not universalizable.

(The act is thus **WRONG** on KCI, and you are done.)

If it *is* possible, then go on to Step 2b ...

# a recipe for applying KCI

Step 2b: determine whether the agent of the act is *willing* to have everyone act on the maxim.

If the agent is *not* willing, then the maxim is *not* universalizable.

(The act is thus **WRONG** on KCI, and you are done.)

If the agent *is* willing, then the maxim *is* universalizable.

(The act is thus **RIGHT** on KCI, and you are done.)

# Problems for KCI

KCI: an act is morally right if and only if its maxim is universalizable.

We will discuss two kinds of problem for KCI:

one for each of the ways in which a maxim can fail to be universalizable:

the (i) way (when it's *impossible* for everyone to act on the maxim)

the (ii) way (when the agent is *unwilling* to have everyone act on the maxim)

# The Problem of Innocent-But-Non-Universalizable Maxims

Our first problem for Kant is the *Problem of Innocent-But-Non-Universalizable Maxims*:

There are some maxims with these two features:

- intuitively, there is nothing wrong with acting on them,
- but, due to some quirk, not everyone could act on them.

# The Problem of Innocent-But-Non-Universalizable Maxims

For example, consider these three maxims:

“When it’s time to decide whether to have children, I will, instead of having children, spend my life making the world better for future generations.”

“At 6:00 a.m. each morning, I will hike Sanitas.”

“When the Stock Market Index reaches 1000, I shall withdraw all my money from the bank.” (Feldman, p. 116)

# The Problem of Innocent-But-Non-Universalizable Maxims

## The Argument from Innocent-But-Non-Universalizable Maxims

P1. If KCI is true, then it's always wrong to act on any of these maxims. (see last slide)

P2. But it's not always wrong to act on any of these maxims.

C. Therefore, KCI is not true.

this one has a  
“right answer”

# clicker question

**Why is it wrong, according to KCI, for someone to act on any of those three maxims? (In other words, what is the rationale for P1?)**

**A.** because everyone's acting on them would have disastrous consequences.

**B.** because it's simply not possible for everyone to act on them.

**C.** because the agent of the act would be willing to have everyone act on them.

**D.** all of the above



# The Problem of Innocent-But-Non-Universalizable Maxims

## The Argument from Innocent-But-Non-Universalizable Maxims

P1. If KCI is true, then it's always morally wrong to act on any of those three maxims.

(see earlier slide for the three maxims)

P2. But it's not always morally wrong to act on those maxims.

C. Therefore, KCI is not true.

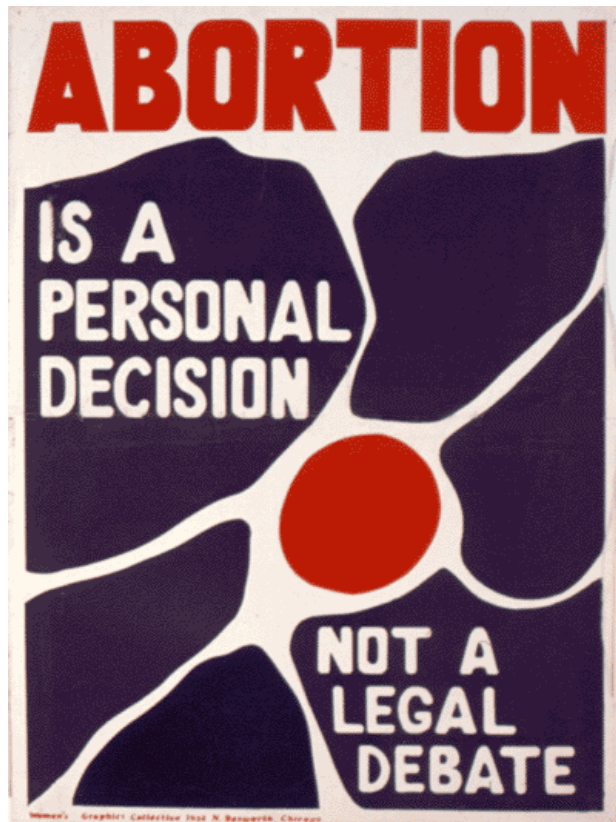
# The Problem of Subjectivism

The second problem for Kant (that we will discuss) we will call the *Problem of Subjectivism*.

“Subjectivism” in ethics is roughly the idea that whether it is right or wrong for some person to do some act depends just on how this person feels about the act.

(cf. cultural relativism)

# The Problem of Subjectivism



# The Problem of Subjectivism

The problem is this:

Kant's theory can seem "too subjectivistic" in some cases in which the act is deemed wrong by KCI due to the fact that its agent is unwilling to have everyone act on the maxim.

In some of these cases, it seems implausible that the moral status of the action could depend *entirely* upon this.

We think that in some of these cases it should depend in part on objective features of the act.

# examples (what's in black is from an earlier slide)

## 2. Recycling Example

act: I throw away my plastic bottle in the trash for the sake of convenience

maxim: “When it’s inconvenient to recycle a plastic bottle, I’ll throw it in the trash.”

Question: Is this maxim universalizable?

Answer: NO.

For I’m *not* willing to have everyone act on this maxim (thus violating (ii) above).

Thus, the act is ~~WRONG~~ according to KCI.

... in that case → **RIGHT**

But what if I am willing?

What if I don't care whether anyone recycles? ...

# The Problem of Subjectivism

## The Subjectivism Argument

P1. If KCI is true, then whether I ought to recycle depends *entirely* on whether I would be willing to have everyone not recycle.

P2. But whether I ought to recycle does not depend entirely on this.

C. Therefore, KCI is not true.