The nature of the act itself. Should not look at the consequences of abortion, but thinking about whether abortion should be legal, we considering the maxims upon which we act. When held that moral truths are known to us the way the world is but not how it is. Kant says that moral truths cannot be verified a posteriori – through experience, as it can tell us the way the world is but not how it should be. Kant held that moral truths are known a priori – by considering the maxims upon which we act. When thinking about whether abortion should be legal, we should not look at the consequences of abortion, but the nature of the act itself.

Kant: Categorical Imperative – Universalisability

“Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.” Kant’s first formulation of the Categorical Imperative appeals to our rationality, and can be found in every major world religion in ‘The Golden Rule’ – treat other people as you want to be treated. It would not make sense for me to criticise someone else for, say, breaking the speed limit if I then went and broke it myself. This is where categorical imperatives (moral principles that apply to everyone) are different from merely hypothetical ones, such as ‘If you don’t want tooth decay, then you ought to brush your teeth twice a day’. All moral principles must be universalisable.

Kant: Categorical Imperative - Law of nature

We could call this the fourth formulation – it is Kant’s way of explaining what the first formulation means. He says the moral agent should ask “what sort of world he should create under the guidance of practical reason... a world into which, moreover, he would place himself as a member.” To some it seems identical to Universalisability, but it goes much further. For example, i could universalise the idea of voluntary euthanasia – a rational person may well prefer living in a society that allows him to choose how he dies. However, if I imagined a law of nature that ended my life at a certain point, this would be very different indeed, and not just some legal rule or principle.

Kant: Categorical Imperative - Ends in themselves

“Act in such a way that you treat humanity... never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.” As well as acting according to rational principles, we must also consider the end of our actions. Hypothetical imperatives have subjective ends, but for an end to be objective, it must be necessary that we pursue it. Rational action results from a free will – if we were to subvert the autonomous will by using humanity as a means to an end, we would deny the possibility of freedom and contradict the first formulation. We must therefore never merely use a person as a means to an end, but always consider them as ends in themselves.

Kant – Perfect duties (self-contradiction)

When universalising a maxim, we need to first consider whether it would be self-contradictory. For example, whilst I might be desperate enough to borrow money that I know I cannot repay, I need to imagine this as a universal maxim that applies to everyone. How would it be if everyone made promises (like paying back money) that they knew they couldn’t keep? If this were so, then it wouldn’t mean anything to say “I promise...” As such, a universal rule “Promises can be broken” would make no sense, and is self-contradictory. In these cases, Kant says we have a perfect duty. This is the strongest form of duty, and it would be completely irrational to act in any other way.

Kant – Imperfect duties (contradictions of the will)

This relates to the first formulation, and maxims that we ‘universalise’. Some principles are not logically self-contradictory, but they are still not the sort of thing that a rational person would choose. For example, it would be possible to have a country where there were no speed limits on any of the roads. However, no rational person would choose to live like that, as it would not be safe. We have an imperfect duty to drive more slowly in areas where people live. There are many imperfect duties – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are examples. Whilst it is possible to imagine a world where you could torture innocent people, it would be contrary to the will.

Kant – Good will

Kant was a deontologist. He believed that the consequences of our actions are irrelevant to whether they are right or not. This is easily demonstrated by thinking of a nasty action that by chance leads to good consequences. In fact the only thing good in itself is the Good Will – the will to do one’s duty. Our legal system works in this way. When arrested for theft, the Judge doesn’t ask what use you made of the money, or what the consequences were – only whether your actions were illegal. Judaeo-Christian religion is based on duty, with Ten Commandments that must not be broken. Deontological ethics looks at the actions we do, and the principles/rules on which they are based.

Kant – Synthetic a priori

Moral truths are synthetic - they tell us about the world we live in. They are not merely ‘analytic’ truths, true by definition. For example, when we say ‘Murder is wrong’, we are not just defining murder as ‘wrongful killing’, as this wouldn’t tell us what ‘wrongful killing’ constitutes. Kant says that moral truths cannot be verified a posteriori – through experience, as it can tell us the way the world is but not how it should be. Kant held that moral truths are known a priori – by considering the maxims upon which we act. When thinking about whether abortion should be legal, we should not look at the consequences of abortion, but the nature of the act itself.

Kant – Lawmaking member of a Kingdom of Ends

Many people call this Kant’s third formulation of the Categorical Imperative, as it combines the first two statements of ‘universalisability’ and treating people as ‘ends in themselves’. He is saying that in considering morality, we need to imagine ourselves making laws in a Kingdom of people who are ends in themselves. We should not act selfishly, or be swayed by emotion; we shouldn’t put our friends and family first. Qurbe Tirmizi, a student working as a cabbie, found over $30,000 dollars in his cab. Whilst he could have put it to great use, instead he handed it in. In so doing, he was making a law for all rational people – when you find something someone has lost, give it in.