

# What is a maxim?

The Formula of Universal Law:

**'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.'**

The first thing you need to know in order to understand The Formula of Universal Law is what Kant means by a maxim. It is clearly something that you act on but that doesn't tell us what it is. Putting together various things Kant says about maxims we can say his definition is:

**A maxim is the subjective principle of your action**

This also needs some explaining. In loose terms a maxim is your inner reason for performing an action. However, we can be a bit more precise than this. For Kant a maxim is not just what motivates this particular action, rather it has a certain generality. So the maxims I follow are the personal policies I use to run my life, e.g.

Be nice to people; don't talk to strangers; tidy up after myself; etc.

However, a little thought shows that these are maybe too general. There will certainly be times when I do need to talk to strangers and I'm not going to tidy up after myself in a restaurant in the same way that I would tidy up at home. So a maxim is not something that necessarily applies all the time but rather is how I will act in a particular set of circumstances. In addition, actions are not performed randomly but rather they are performed to achieve a certain ends. You will recall that hypothetical imperatives take the form: if you want x then you should do y. So you can also think of a maxim as a hypothetical imperative that you have adopted as a personal policy. This all gives us the following definition:

**A maxim is a personal policy with the following structure:**

**Whenever I find myself in circumstance C,  
I will do x in order to achieve y**

There are some additional things that might be noted about maxims:

Firstly, it isn't necessary that someone is consciously aware of the maxim on which they are acting. We spend most of our time just getting on with life without thinking too much about the underlying reasons for our actions. However, if we were challenged and we thought our action was rational then we would be able to supply the underlying reason.

Secondly, the structure as outlined is a little artificial and if we were challenged it is likely that we would offer the shortened version of our policy, e.g. 'be nice to people', but that doesn't mean that with a bit more careful analysis we wouldn't be able to give the more precise, if more artificially sounding, wording.

Thirdly, maxims only apply to our voluntary behaviour. If someone made a loud noise behind me I might jump, my heart rate might increase, and my body might produce more adrenalin, but in these circumstances it would be inappropriate to ask what maxim I was acting on.

Fourthly, although the maxim has a certain generality, ('whenever I find myself in circumstance C...'), this doesn't mean that someone can never change their mind about which maxims, which personal policies, they regard as the correct ones for running their life.