



Jaffa: Endangering California?

Last week's rain in southern California will hardly make a dent in the state's devastating drought, and it raises an important question for individual consumers: exactly how should we decide how much water to use? There are obvious things: don't hose down your driveway, take shorter showers, do full loads in the washer. But there are a lot of other decisions to make, and it isn't clear to me how to go about choosing.

So consider this as an example:

As my wife never hesitates to remind me, I'm not much of a homebody. I like getting out. But in an effort to do more home-related things, last June, I bought an orange tree seedling; I would develop my inner gardener, I thought. I named the tree "Jaffa." And so for the past few months I have done my best to take care of it.

But there is one big problem: despite what you might think, orange trees are not native to California, and they are anything but drought-tolerant. They need water. Indeed, the early development of California irrigation stemmed from the demands of farmers who realized that oranges would grow beautifully in the state if they got enough water.

So should I keep watering Jaffa? That's where Immanuel Kant comes in.



Immanuel Kant: How Categorical!

Kant, of course, is famous for his “[categorical imperative](#),” a moral principle that universalizes individual action. When confronted with a moral challenge, Kant suggested that you ask: what if everyone did this? “Every rational being,” Kant argued, “must so act as if he were through his maxim always a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends.”

Back to Jaffa. Let’s see: I never water my lawn — or more accurately, what’s left of my lawn (it’s mostly weeds now — one of these days, I will put in fancy-schmancy desert landscaping). Don’t water in the backyard, either, except for native plants that my wife put in. So what if everyone in California didn’t water their lawns, or tore them out, and replaced them with drought-tolerant landscapes but also had an orange tree? Or maybe even *two* orange trees? That would be great!

I think, then, that the proper approach is to 1) avoid using water where it is obviously wasteful, e.g. long showers, hosing down the driveway; and then 2) consider overall water use. If I am using a certain amount of water, but if every urban user did the same, California would be in far better shape, then it’s okay.

So I’m happy to keep watering Jaffa. She’s beginning to produce some nice fruit. And I don’t feel guilty about that at all.