

The Categorical Imperative Again and Again

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Philosophy 5B-3  
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April 29, 1998

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Philosophy is repetitive and at many times unbelievably pointless. No wonder Immanuel Kant was a great philosopher. In the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant discusses his moral theory. A central topic in his philosophy is the categorical imperative, which he repeats several times, each time presenting a different formulation. But all formulations essentially contain the same basic ideas. In order to understand the ideas behind the categorical imperative, it is necessary to first examine the foundation that Kant builds for his philosophy of morals.

To begin with, Kant draws an analogy between the laws of ethics and the laws of science. Just as the laws of science can be known by pure reason, the laws of ethics, or morality, can be known by practical reason. Morality, though, is a normative system, as opposed to the natural laws of science. A normative system prescribes what ought to happen, as opposed to a natural system that determines what actually does happen. Since morality only cares for what ought to happen and not with what actually happens, moral laws, then, must be found a priori. Everything a posteriori or discovered with the senses only shows what did happen, not what ought to have happened. Moral laws must not be derived from examples, since moral laws would hold even if there were no examples. Therefore, the foundation of morality for Kant must lie with reason alone. Rationality is the key to morality. Based on this premise, it follows that all rational beings must have the same moral laws, and all moral laws would have absolute necessity that would apply universally to all rational beings.

An action to have moral worth, besides being a universal law, also must come from duty and duty alone. Duty is the cause of an action when it is done purely out of respect for the law. Kant distinguishes between two kinds of duties: perfect and imperfect duties. A perfect duty is one where people are not treated as a means to an end, while imperfect duties involve treating people as ends. To not tell lies is an example of a perfect duty, since when one tells a lie, one is using the other person as a means to one's end. To be beneficent and charitable to others is an imperfect duty. Even though not helping others does not treat others as a means to one's end, it does not treat others as an end in themselves. When perfect and imperfect duties conflict, Kant believes that perfect duties override imperfect duties. In other words, it is more important to not treat someone as a means than it is to treat someone as an end. For example, one must tell the truth even if in so doing, one hurts someone's feelings and is a catalyst to their suicide.

To follow duties, rational beings have wills. A will that accords with duty is the only unconditional good, since only with a good will can any other good be achieved. From a good will come all other goods. Since good comes from the will alone, the consequences of an action are irrelevant in determining moral actions. A moral act is good in itself, so the end result of an action cannot be used to justify the morality of an action. For example, lying cannot be justified as being moral or immoral by observing the consequences from the action. These consequences are only the subjective ends that arise from the particular situation. The basis of moral and practical must be from objective principles that are universally valid for any rational being. Consequently, we cannot use subjective ends, that is our inclinations or feelings in the determination of moral law, since these are contingent on specific facts, while any moral law must apply to all rational beings.

Since morality lies with rationality, and a good will is necessary for duty to be followed, then the purpose of reason is to produce a good will. Kant defines an imperative as a command that reason gives to the will. There are two kinds of imperatives: hypothetical imperatives and categorical imperatives. Hypothetical imperatives are based on some specific end or purpose: "If I want to get a

good grade, then I must write a good essay" or "if I want to sleep, then I must lie down." These imperatives are conditional, since I may not want a good grade or want to sleep. But, moral laws being universally applicable cannot depend on external facts, such as my desire for sleep. Desires, inclinations, and anything other than reason, cannot be used to determine a moral law, since then the law would be contingent on a person having a certain desire or inclination. Any moral law that must necessarily be applied to all rational beings must come from reason alone. Therefore, no form of a hypothetical imperative can be used as a basis for universal moral law.

The other type of imperative is then, the categorical imperative which is just one that does not depend on some other end. A categorical imperative represents an action that is good and necessary in itself. The idea of a categorical imperative is a purely formal idea, with the primary characteristic of being universally applicable. All rational beings are held accountable to the categorical imperative, and no exceptions can be made for any specific person or group of persons. To check whether any maxim, or reason behind a possible action, can be considered a moral law, one attempts to fit the maxim into the form of a categorical imperative. If the maxim cannot be thought of as a universal law, applicable to all rational beings, then the maxim cannot be a moral law. For example, a maxim could be breaking promises whenever one has the desire to do so. One instantly arrives at a contradiction, however, when one tries to form it as a categorical imperative, or as something that can be applied universally. The idea of a promise would become meaningless if the maxim were followed universally. Thus, it is not valid as a moral law. These maxims that correspond to contradictions that arise from conceiving them as universal laws are perfect duties. Other maxims are not moral laws, not because they are contradictions in themselves, but because no rational being would be able to will it as such. These maxims, such as not wishing to help other persons, are in the category of imperfect duties.

From just the form of the categorical imperative, it is possible to derive the content of a categorical imperative. Kant proposes at least three versions of the categorical imperative. The first is the most general and is based on the universality of moral laws. A maxim that cannot be thought of by reason as a universal law without contradiction or one that cannot be willed by a rational being cannot be a valid moral law. This categorical imperative basically states that one should not make an exception for oneself. Moral laws apply to everyone. One should always act so as to will that one's maxim could become a universal law. The second formulation of the categorical imperative applies the necessity of universal laws to humanity. "Rational nature exists as an end in itself" (429) and so we must treat humanity as an end in itself. For example, life insurance is a contradictory idea in itself, since human life is an end and has infinite value in itself. A third formulation of the categorical imperative says that the source of moral law comes from the will of each individual. Every rational being self-legislates moral and universal laws, and the laws that they have set down for themselves would also be binding on everyone else, since they are universally applicable. Kant calls this the autonomy of the will. Autonomy does not mean that we can do whatever we want. Autonomy means that we can self-legislate or give laws to ourselves, and that the will decides for itself what universal law should be. The will is thus subject to the law, because the source of the law can be found in the will itself.

Are these three formulations equivalent? All of these formulations of the categorical imperative are based on several key components. First, the general form must include the necessary requirement of the universality of moral law. The content of each formulation is also the same, that rational beings should be treated as ends in themselves. Applied to humans, this leads to a respect for persons as ends

and never as means. They also all rely on the concept of an autonomous and self-legislating will as the method by which the moral law will gain its power and validity. Kant attempts to refute all moral theories that rely on the heteronomy of the will, or a will that is not free to determine moral laws in itself. He finds moral theories that take moral principles from some religious source, i.e. God, or based on the idea of what's "right," are not sufficient in capturing the true ideas of morality. If one acts in some way because one believes it is a divine commandment or because one feels that it is right to do so, then one does not have a will that is self-legislating. The principles determining a good will must be a categorical imperative, as they both must necessarily be unconditionally good. Thus, the source of moral actions comes from rational beings themselves, and not from any external force.

It is still necessary to show the equivalence of these three formulations, and we can do this by deriving each formulation from another one. We can derive the second formulation, the statement of humanity as an end, from the first formulation of the universality of moral law. Kant does this by asserting that rationality is an end in itself. Since each and every rational being must necessarily think of themselves as an end, it must be a universally true principle that rational beings are ends in themselves. When a maxim can be made a universal law, as by the first statement of the categorical imperative, we are not treating anyone as means, but rather as ends in themselves. To take exception to the universal law requires us to treat another person as means. It is therefore necessary that if the categorical imperative most apply universally to all rational beings, then it is also necessary to treat all rational beings, and specifically humanity, as ends and never as means.

From the second formulation, we can derive the third formulation of a self-legislating will. Neither of the first two formulations mentions the source that impels a rational being to follow the moral law. We know that this source cannot be found from some external object, since moral principles must be found by a priori methods and not with external sources. This logically leads us to conclude that a rational being follows the moral law from reason alone. In other words, the source of a law's validity lies within the end itself and not in anything else. By the second formulation, we have determined that rational beings themselves are the ends; therefore, universal moral laws must come from the rational beings themselves.

To complete the circle, we can show that the formulation of universality follows from the third formulation above. Within the last formulation itself, it states that each rational being has a will that self-legislates universal law. One legislates law that can be applied to everyone, that is, can be universalized. Therefore, any law that follows from the third formulation must also fit the formulation of the universal law. By showing that the first formulation implies the second formulation, and the second formulation implies the third, and the third implies the first, this shows that the three formulations do indeed equivalently describe Kant's moral theory.

Why is it necessary to have all of these formulations if they are equivalent? Kant thinks that these different formulations are "subjectively rather than objectively practical" (436). They are intended to represent the same idea in different ways so as to make it easier to understand. It is better to use the first and most general formulation of the categorical imperative, which involves the universality of moral laws, for practical purposes, but the other formulations allow us "to bring the moral law nearer to intuition" (437). Something about Kant is just not intuitive, and it is good to know that at times, he is thinking about letting us make sense of his ideas. These different formulations, although containing the same basic ideas, attempts to show the categorical imperative from different viewpoints. Certainly the categorical imperative makes more sense when it is given some concrete content rather than just

leaving it with the form of universality. Taken together, these formulations give a complete picture of Kant's philosophy involving the universality of moral law, of humanity as an end in itself, and of the autonomy of the will.

Although there may be questions as to the practicality or applicability of Kant's theories, he does establish a logical foundation for morality centered around rational thought, of which the categorical imperative plays an important role. And while categorical imperatives may not solve the world's problem, they do give us something interesting to think about.