

KANT'S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE: A MORAL OBLIGATION

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INTRODUCTION

Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher has done an extraordinary work in the field of philosophy. Like Plato and Aristotle his rank was high in western culture. His work was highly original and very wide-rang(ing) which was produced at a crucial time in the development of philosophy when there was tension between the continental allegiance to rational thought and the espousal of sense experience. Kant attempted a synthesis of these two themes and thereby changed the course of philosophy. He recognized the strength of the empiricist claim that sense experience is the source of all our beliefs but could not accept its skeptical conclusion that those beliefs cannot be justified. At the same time he rejected the rationalist claim that factual truths about what does not exist can be conclusively established by the use of reason alone. As a predecessor (successor) of Hume, the views and opinions on morality given by Hume was not accepted by him. He gave his statements on morality in his style. In the history of philosophy Kant is the primary supporter of deontological ethics; the study of duty. As per Kant, the sole feature that gives an action its moral worth is not the outcome that is achieved by the action, but the motive that is behind the action. The categorical imperative is Kant's famous statement of this duty: "*Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law*".

CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Kant suggests the internal law of conscience or practical reason is the ultimate moral standard. The moral law is a categorical imperative. All imperatives are commands which are divided into categorical and hypothetical imperative. Hypothetical imperatives declare a possible action to be a practically necessary as a means to the attainment of something else that one wills or may will. A categorical imperative would be one which represented

an action as objectively necessary in itself apart from its relation to a further end.¹ There are three kinds of imperatives, 1) *problematic or technical*, 2) *assertoric or pragmatic*, 3) *apodeictic*.² They all exercise a different kind of necessitation, as rules of skill, counsel of prudence and commands of morality.

Some objective principles are conditioned by a will for some end which is followed by a rational agent. This objective principle gives rise to hypothetical imperatives and general form of this principle would be ‘if I will this end, I ought to do such and such’. This principle binds us to do an action which is good as means to an end which is already willed or might be willed. The imperatives are problematic or technical when the end is merely the one that we might will. They are called imperatives of skill and the actions they entail are good in the sense of being skillful or useful. The imperatives are ‘assertoric’ or ‘pragmatic’ when a rational agent wills the end by his very own nature. The end that every rational agent wills is his own happiness and the enjoined by this imperative are good in the sense of prudent. But there are some objective principles which are unconditioned. They would necessarily be followed by rational agent. They are not based on willing some ends. These principle gives rise to categorical imperatives, which have the general form, without any ‘if’ as a priori condition, like ‘I ought to do such and such.’ These are unconditioned imperatives of morality, and the actions they enjoin are morally good as means for some further ends.³ Hypothetical imperatives thus say that only an action is good for some purpose or other, either possible or actual.⁴ But, the goodness of the action is enjoined by the categorical imperatives is good in itself. In the case of hypothetical imperatives, actions are good only as means.

As per Kant, if we were to answer the question, “How are imperatives possible?” the only question in need of a solution is, ‘How are the commands possible in morality?’ To justify a categorical imperative we have to show that a fully rational agent would necessarily act in a certain way, not by choice, but as simply and solely as rational. But in case of hypothetical imperatives, it rests on the analytic principle that any rational agent who wills an end must necessarily will an end and must necessarily will the known means to that end. Similarly imperatives of skill and imperatives of prudence are justified in the same way. ‘If you will any ends you must will the means’ is the principle of all hypothetical imperatives. Kant holds that to conceive a categorical imperative is to conceive a categorical imperative and not to know what it enjoins.⁵ To conceive the principle of all hypothetical imperatives, ‘If you will any ends, you ought to will the means’ is to know what it enjoins, but it is not to know all the applications of particular categorical imperatives. So far there is no difference between the

¹ H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperatives* (Hutchinson’s University Library, London:1946), Op.cit.p. 78.

² Op.cit.p. 27.

³ Ibid., p. 27.

⁴ Ibid., p.78.

⁵ Paul. Guyer, *Kant* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London: 2006), p. 180.

categorical imperatives and hypothetical imperatives. The difference lies in the fact that in case of categorical imperative, knowledge at the end which we seek and the means to attain this end does not determine how the imperative is to be applied. The categorical imperatives, unlike hypothetical imperatives, can and must be applied independently of our particular desires for a particular end.

Kant holds that the fundamental principle at the basis of all our moral duties is categorical imperative because it is a command. It commands us to exercise our wills in a particular way, not to perform some action which is subject to condition. It is virtue because we possess a rational will, without references to any ends. In other words, it does not apply to us and on the conditions that we have antecedently adopted some goal for ourselves. Of course, the hypothetical imperatives have a non-conditional form, because they are the means to an end.

Apart from moral duties there are other duties which are distinguished from moral duties and are based on a quite different kind of principle, a principle that is a hypothetical imperative. A hypothetical imperative is a command that also applies to us in virtue of our having a rational will which requires us to exercise our wills in a certain way given that we have antecedently willed an end. It is a conditional form. The condition, under which a hypothetical imperative applies to us, then is that, we will some end. According to Kant, willing an end involves more than desiring or wanting which requires the exercise of practical reason and focusing oneself on the pursuit of that end. Kant names the 'problematic' and 'assertoric', based on how the end is willed. If the end is one that we might or might not will that is, it is merely a possible end, the imperative is problematic. Almost all non-moral, rational imperatives are problematic, since there are virtually no ends that we must will. Then the only non-moral end that we must will in Kant's view (by 'natural necessity' for Kant) is our own happiness. Any imperative that applied to us because we will our own happiness would thus be an 'assertoric imperative'. For example, we can say that if one is to be happy, he should save for the future or take care of his health; all these fail to be genuine commands. Some people are happy without these, and whether you could be happy without these is still doubtful.

Kant presents moral and prudential rational requirements as first and foremost demands on our wills rather than on external acts, moral and prudential evaluation is first and foremost an evaluation of the will our actions express applying to the action themselves only derivatively. Thus it is not an error of rationality to fail to take the necessary means to one's willed ends, nor to fail to want to take the means; one only falls foul of practical reason if one fails to will the means, likewise, while actions, feelings or desires may be the focus of other moral views, for Kant practical irrationality, both moral and prudential, focuses an exercise of our will.

THE FORMULATIONS

To make categorical imperative more strong Kant comes up with five different formulas such as:

- 1) *The formula of universal law*
- 2) *The formula of the law of nature*
- 3) *The formula of end in itself*
- 4) *The formula of autonomy*
- 5) *The formula of the kingdom of end*

The first one is concerned with the form of moral maxim, i.e. with its universality; the second with its matter, i.e. with its end; while third combines both form and matter, the purpose of the other is to bring the idea of duty closer to induction.⁶

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'.⁷

The formula of universal law formulates the categorical imperative that is, to state what it commands or what it tells. According to Kant, all people, in all times, in all places are morally forbidden to act on maxims that they can't consistently will to be universal laws. In other words, it bids us to act for the sake of law or bids us to act in accordance with the universal law or in other sense, it bids us to act for the sake of the law. It means that it bids us to act on the principle which is valid for all rational beings; it is valid not because we want to attain some ends. According to Kant there is one categorical imperative that bids us to perform an action which is good, not as a means for some end or to the satisfaction of some particular desire, for the action which is good in itself is one which every rational agent would perform, if reason has a full control over his passions.

When Kant speaks about 'the categorical imperative' and assert that there is only one, such imperative he has in the mind the principle of all particular categorical imperative; just as the hypothetical imperatives 'if you will any end, you ought to will the means' is the principle of all hypothetical imperatives.⁸ So particular

⁶ H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperatives* (Hutchinson's University Library, London: 1946), Op.cit.p. 98.

⁷ Op.cit.p. 29.

⁸ Ibid., p. 134.

categorical imperative, e.g. thou shalt not kill', are applications of the categorical imperative. He means that they are derived from it but that does not mean that they are 'deduced' from it.

The Formula of Law of Nature

'Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal of nature'.⁹

A law of cause and effect is primarily the law of nature. When Kant asks us to regard our maxims as if they were the laws of nature, he treats them as purposive (or teleological) laws. He is already supposing that nature or at least human nature is teleological or is what he latter calls a kingdom of nature and mere mechanism.¹⁰ Here Kant holds that a man is morally good, not so far as he acts out of self-interest or passion, but in so far as he acts on an impersonal principle valid for others as well as for himself. So, in his illustration, he enumerates a few duties, following customary divisions into duties towards self and into perfect and imperfect duties.

A perfect duty is one which admits of no exception in the interests of inclination. The examples given under this heading are the ban on committing suicide and borrowing of money with the knowledge that we are not able to pay it back. We are not entitled to commit suicide even if we have a strong inclination to do so, and we are not permitted to make a false premise in order to borrow some money, nor are we allowed to pay our debt to one man and not to another because we love one more than the other. But in case of imperfect duty there is a certain interest of inclination. Here, we are bound only to adopt the maximum of developing our talents and of helping others and we are to some extent entitled to decide arbitrarily which talents we will develop and which person we will help.¹¹ Duties towards self, Kant assumes that various capacities have a natural function or purpose in life and it is a perfect duty not to destroy such purposes in case of duties towards self. On the other hand in case of duties towards other we have a perfect duty not to the realization of possible systematic harmony of purposes among men; and we have a positive duty to further the realization of such a systematic harmony.¹²

The Formula of End in it-self

'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether you are your person or in the person of any other, never simply as means, but always as the same time as an end'¹³

⁹ Op.cit.p. 30.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 30.

¹¹ Op.cit.p. 31.

¹² Ibid., p. 31.

¹³ Ibid., p. 92.

This formula brings in secondary characteristics of all actions; for all rational actions, in addition to having a principle, must also set before itself an end. The subjective ends, which are the ground of hypothetical imperatives, and their value is relative and conditioned. But, the objective ends, which are given to us by reason, are unconditioned and absolute and as such could not be the mere product of our actions, because the mere product of our mere actions could not have absolute and unconditioned value. They must be the ground of categorical imperative in the same way as the subjective ends are the ground of hypothetical imperatives. Only rational agents can be an end in themselves; and it is wrong to use them simply as means to an end, whose value is relative, without such end in themselves there would be no unconditioned good, no supreme principle of action, and human beings, no categorical imperatives, so far as necessary duty to the others is concerned, the man who has a mind to make a false promise to others will see at once that he is intending to make use of another man merely. So means to an end he does not share.¹⁴ This is so because for the man whom I seek to use for my own purposes by such a false promise can never share the end of the action; because it will not agree with my way of behaving to him.

The Formula of Autonomy

‘So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxim’

This formula is itself like the formula of universal law. Here, rational agents as subjects are the ground of this categorical imperative, and the law which we are bound to obey must be the product of our own will (as long as we are rational agents). So, it rests on the idea of the will of every rational being as a will which makes a universal law. Although Kant does not state this as an imperative as he does in other formulation. It is easy enough to put it in that form: act so that through your maxims you could be legislator of universal laws. This is the most important formulation. However, in this case we focus on our status as universal law givers rather than universal law followers. This is, of course the very dignity of the humanity that Kant speaks of the in the second formulation. A rational will that is merely bound by universal laws could act accordingly from the natural and non-natural motives, such as self-interest. But in order to be a legislator of universal laws, such contingent motives, motives that rational agents such as ourselves may or may not have, must be set aside. Hence, we are required according to this formulation, to conform our behavior to the principle that expresses this autonomy of the rational will, its status as the source of the very universal laws that obligate it.

¹⁴ Op.cit.p. 34.

The categorical imperatives exclude our personal interest and desires. This has been made explicit in the formula of autonomy, only when we conceive our will as making its own law. We are able to understand how an imperative could exclude the personal interest and be categorical. According to Kant any philosophy which tries to explain moral obligation by any kind of interest makes a categorical imperative inconceivable and deny morality altogether.¹⁵ They may all be said to propound a doctrine of heteronomy which portrays the will as bounded by a law which has its origin in some other object or end other than the will itself. Theories of this kind rise to only hypothetical imperatives, which is non-moral.

The Formula of the Kingdom of Ends

'So act as if you were through your maxims a law-making member of a kingdom of ends'

The formula of the kingdom of ends springs directly from the formula of autonomy. So far as rational agents are subjected to universal laws which they themselves make, they constitute a kingdom and so far as these laws bid them to treat each other as ends in themselves, the kingdom so constituted in the kingdom of ends.¹⁶ Kant states that the above concept of 'every rational will as well as that must regard itself as enacting laws binding all rational wills is closely connected to another concept, that of a systematic union of different rational beings under common laws', or "kingdom of ends". The concept of every rational being as one who must regard himself as making universal law by all the maxim of his will, and must seek to judge himself and his actions from this point of view, leads to a closely connected and very fruitful concept namely, that of a 'kingdom of ends'. The concept of every rational being as one who must regard himself as making universal law by all the maxim of his will, and must seek to judge himself and his actions from this point of view, lead to a closely connected and very fruitful concept, namely, that of a 'kingdom of ends'.¹⁷ All rational beings stand under the law that they should treat others never simply as means, but always at the same time as an end in himself. By doing this, there arises a systematic union of rational beings under common objective law, .i.e. a kingdom. Since these laws are directed precisely to the relation of such beings to one another as ends and means, the kingdom can be called the kingdom of ends as member, and so far as he makes universal laws, he is also himself subject to these laws. He must also regard himself subject to these laws; he is also himself as making laws in a kingdom of ends which are possible through freedom of will. Here we must distinguish between the members of such a kingdom and its supreme head. As law-making member of the kingdom of ends, every rational agent has what is called 'dignity', i.e. an intrinsic, unconditioned, incomparable worth or worthiness.

¹⁵ Paul. Guyer, *Kant* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London: 2006), Op.cit.pp. 203-5.

¹⁶ Op.cit.p. 95.

¹⁷ Paul Guyer, *kant* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London: 2006), Op.cit.p. 213-214.

In kingdom of ends, everything has either a price or dignity. It has a price, something can be put in its place as an equivalent; but if it is above all price and has no equivalent, then it has a dignity. Morality or virtue, and humanity, so far as it is capable of morality, can alone have dignity. It cannot be compared with things that have an economic value (market value) and aesthetic value (a fancy price). The incomparable worth of a good man springs from his being a law making member in a kingdom of ends. The formulation of the categorical imperative states that we must act in accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for the merely possible kingdom of ends. It combines the others in that, 1) it requires that we confirm our actions to maxims of a legislator of the laws 2) that this law giver lays down universal laws. Binding all rational wills including our own, and 3) that those laws are of 'a merely possible kingdom' each of whose members equally possesses this status as a legislator of universal moral laws, and hence must be treated always as an end in itself. The intuitive idea behind this formulation is that our fundamental moral obligation is to act through a community of fully rational agents, each of whom has an equal share in legislating these principles for their community.

Kant's famous ethical formulation is 'categorical imperative' which is a command by a person's own reason, it applies not just to that person but to all human being with reason; that is, to all rational creatures. Because an essential feature of the moral law is universality, it is the essence of the categorical imperative. According to Kant an action is morally acceptable if and only if the maxim, the individual follows is morally acceptable. Kant maintains that a maxim is morally acceptable if and only one could consistently will it to be a universal law. As categorical imperative is a command, it is created by itself. It is pure reason which is the source of all our practical reason. This pure moral motive which is free from bad intention. Its nature is always good. It always commands us to do or act for a good action without any result. It is unconditional and not originates from sympathy or emotion. As per Kant, morality is not the source of sympathy, motive and emotions. For Kant, the goodness or badness, rightness or wrongness of our actions do not depend on the agent's interests or inclinations. There should be a moral law by which we should judge human action, a law which is valid for all rational agents. It is categorical because it only acts but never expects any end. It is only the means but not the end.