

The Categorical Imperative: Two Formulas

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So far, we've established Kant's case that in order to act morally we must act with a good will, and that acting with a good will requires acting in accordance with duty because it is our duty. The question remains what duty, or what Kant also calls the *moral law* consists in.

Whatever the moral law tells us, Kant believes it will tell us to do things that are right for no other reason than the sort of action they are — actions that are *good in themselves*. So, the sort of command that morality gives us must be a categorical, rather than a hypothetical imperative, as the latter only tells us to perform actions on the basis of some condition, such as a goal or desire that we might have.

If we want to know what morality commands us, then, we have to answer the question: what exactly does a categorical imperative tell us to do? Kant gives a number of answers, which he regards as different ways of describing one and the same command. We'll look at two of those characterizations here: the Formula of Law of Nature (FLN), and the Formula of the End in Itself (FEI).

1 The Formula of Law of Nature

Kant arrives at FLN by considering the very concept of a categorical imperative. A categorical imperative tells us what we must do irrespective of the conditions that we find ourselves in. Any further content that one might add to an imperative beyond this would be some *condition under which it is binding*. Hence, Kant infers, the only possible content that a categorical imperative *could* have is to will in such a way that anyone could will irrespective of the conditions they find themselves in. This is how Kant arrives at his first formulation of the categorical imperative.

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

FLN says that we ought only to will to do something if such a will could be had by all rational beings; that is, if one judges that to act in some way would be good, and to act on that judgment, it must be possible that all rational beings judge so as well, and to act on that judgment as well.

2 The Formula of the End in Itself

Further in the second section of the Groundwork, Kant returns to the idea that the conditions that we find ourselves in cannot in themselves provide us with ends commanded by the moral law. In particular, nothing that we desire can serve as the end of rational action:

The ends which a rational being arbitrarily proposes to himself as effects of... action (material ends) are all merely relative, for only their relation to specially constituted faculty of desire in the subject gives them their worth. Consequently, such worth cannot provide any universal principles, which are valid and necessary for all rational beings.... Therefore, all such relative ends can be grounds only for hypothetical imperatives.

In this quote, Kant says that since it is merely a contingent, empirical fact that we desire the things we do, it cannot be a universal moral law, one that applies to all rational beings, that one pursues this or that we desire, as such a universal law must be necessary and knowable a priori. Our desires can merely determine for us hypothetical imperatives - commands that tell us, given our ends, what means to take.

A categorical imperative, Kant infers, must be such that what it proposes as an end is 'necessarily an end for everyone', that is, something that all rational action is directed at. As Kant has observed, in the meantime, that humanity, the capacity for rational action, is '[an end] for which there can be substituted no other end to which such beings should serve merely as a means'. So, it appears that we have one end which can serve as a necessary end for all rational beings.

Hence Kant arrives at FEI:

FEI: Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.

3 Study Questions

1. Explain the distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives. Why does Kant think that a fundamental principle of morality cannot be a hypothetical imperative? Why must it be a categorical imperative?
2. Explain in your own words why the only possible content that a categorical imperative have is to will in such a way that anyone could will irrespective of the conditions they find themselves in. Why does this entail that there is only one categorical imperative?
3. What are the four examples that Kant uses to 'test' FLN and FEI? Can you come up with your own example, and apply each formula?
4. Why does Kant believe that humanity is '[an end] for which there can be substituted no other end to which such beings should serve merely as a means'?