

imperative, I know right away what it will contain. For all the imperative contains is

the law, and

the necessity that the maxim conform to the law;

and the law doesn't contain any condition limiting it (comparable with the condition that is always part of a hypothetical imperative.). So there is nothing left for the maxim to conform to except the universality of a law as such, and what the imperative represents as necessary is just precisely that conformity of maxim to law.⁸

So there is only one categorical imperative, and this is it:
 •Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law*.

Now if all imperatives of duty can be derived from this one imperative as a principle, we'll at least be able to show what we understand by the concept of duty, what the concept means, even if we haven't yet settled whether so-called 'duty' is an empty concept or not.

The universality of law according to which effects occur constitutes what is properly called *nature* in the most general sense, . . . i.e. the existence of things considered as determined by universal laws. So the universal imperative of duty can be expressed as follows: **Act as though the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature.**

I want now to list some duties, adopting the usual division of them into •duties to ourselves and •duties to others, and into •perfect duties and •imperfect duties.⁹

⁸ A *maxim* is a subjective principle of acting, and must be distinguished from the *objective principle*, which is the practical *law*. The maxim contains the practical rule that reason comes up with in conformity with the state the person (the subject) is in, including his preferences, his ignorances, and so on; so it is the principle according to which the subject *acts*. The law, on the other hand, is the objective principle valid for every rational being, and the principle by which the subject *ought to act*; that is, it is an imperative.

⁹ Please note that I reserve the •serious, considered• division of duties for a future *metaphysic of morals*, and that the present division is merely one I chose as an aid to arranging my examples. . .

(1) A man who has been brought by a series of troubles to the point of despair and of weariness with life still has his reason sufficiently to ask himself: 'Wouldn't it be contrary to my duty to myself to take my own life?' Now he asks: 'Could the maxim of my action -in killing myself- become a universal law of nature?' Well, here is his maxim:

For love of myself, I make it my principle to cut my life short when prolonging it threatens to bring more troubles than satisfactions.

So the question is whether *this* principle of self-love could become a universal law of nature. If it did, that would be a nature that had a law according to which a single feeling •created a life-affirming push and also •led to the destruction of life itself; and we can see at a glance that such a 'nature' would contradict itself, and so couldn't be a nature. So the maxim we are discussing *couldn't* be a law of nature, and therefore would be utterly in conflict with the supreme principle of duty.

(2) Another man sees himself being driven by need to borrow money. He realizes that no-one will lend to him unless he firmly promises to repay it at a certain time, and he is well aware that he wouldn't be able to keep such a promise. He is disposed to make such a promise, but he has enough conscience to ask himself: 'Isn't it improper and opposed to duty to relieve one's needs in that way?' If he does decide to make the promise, the maxim of his action will run like this:

When I think I need money. I will borrow money and promise to repay it, although I know that the repayment won't ever happen.

•Here he is—for the rest of this paragraph—reflecting on this: ‘It may be that this principle of self-love or of personal advantage would fit nicely into my whole future welfare, so that there is no *prudential* case against it’. But the question remains: would it be right? ‘To answer this’, I change the demand of self-love into a universal law, and then put the question like this: If my maxim became a universal law, *then* how would things stand? I can see straight off that it could never hold as a universal law of nature, and must contradict itself. For if you take a law saying that anyone who thinks he is in need can make any promises he likes without intending to keep them, and make it *universal* ‘so that everyone in need *does* behave in this way’, that would make the promise and the intended purpose of it *impossible*—no-one would believe what was promised to him but would only laugh at any such performance as a vain pretence.’

(3) A third finds in himself a talent that could be developed so as to make him in many respects a useful person. But he finds himself in comfortable circumstances, and would rather indulge in pleasure than take the trouble to broaden and improve his fortunate natural gifts. But now he asks whether his maxim of neglecting his gifts, agreeing as it does with his liking for idle amusement, also agrees with what is called ‘duty’. He sees that a system of nature conforming with this law could indeed *exist*, with everyone behaving like the Islanders of the south Pacific, letting their talents rust and devoting their lives merely to idleness, indulgence, and baby-making—in short, to *pleasure*. But he can't possibly **will** that this should become a universal law of nature or that it should be implanted in us by a natural instinct. For,

as a rational being, he necessarily wills that all his abilities should be developed, because they serve him and are given to him for all sorts of possible purposes.

(4) A fourth man, for whom things are going well, sees that others (whom he could help) have to struggle with great hardships, and he thinks to himself:

What concern of mine is it? Let each one be as happy as heaven wills, or as he can make himself; I won't take anything from him or even envy him; but I have no desire to contribute to his welfare or help him in time of need.

If such a way of thinking were a universal law of nature, the human race could certainly survive—and no doubt *that* state of humanity would be better than one where everyone chatters about sympathy and benevolence and exerts himself occasionally to practice them, while also taking every chance he can to cheat, and to betray or otherwise violate people's rights. But although it is possible that that maxim should be a universal law of nature, it is impossible to **will** that it do so. For a will that brought *that* about would conflict with itself, since instances can often arise in which the person in question would need the love and sympathy of others, and he would have no hope of getting the help he desires, being robbed of it by this law of nature springing from his own will.

Those are a few of the many duties that we have (or at least think we have) that can clearly be derived from the single principle that I have stated on the preceding page. We must be *able to will* that a maxim of our action become a universal law; this is the general formula for the moral evaluation of our action. •Some actions are so constituted that their maxim can't even be *thought* as a universal law of nature without contradiction, let alone being *willed* to be such. It's easy to see that an action of that kind conflicts with stricter or narrower (absolutely obligatory) duty. •With

other actions, the maxim-made-universal-law is not in that way internally impossible (self-contradictory), but it is still something that no-one could possibly *will* to be a universal law of nature, because such a will would contradict itself. It's easy to see that an action of *that* kind conflicts with broader (meritorious) duty. Thinking of duties in terms not of the *object* of their action but rather of the *kind of obligation* they involve, what I have given is a complete display of all the kinds of duty, in terms of their dependence on a single principle.

If we attend to what happens in us when we act against duty, we find that we don't (because we *can't*) actually will that our maxim should become a universal law. Rather, we are willing that the opposite of the maxim on which we are acting should remain as a law generally, but we take the liberty of catering to our preferences by making an exception—just for me, just this once! So if we weighed everything from a single standpoint, namely that of *reason*, we would find a contradiction in our own will: willing that a certain principle •be objectively necessary as a universal law and yet •subjectively not hold universally but rather admit of exceptions. However, we *don't* consider our actions in this unitary way; rather, we regard our action •at one time• from the point of view of a will wholly conformable to reason and then •at another time• from the point of view of a will affected by preferences; so there is actually no contradiction, but rather the preference's *resisting* the command of reason. In this the •universality of the principle is changed into mere •generality—i.e. the move is made from *all* to *ever so many* or *almost all*—so that the practical principle of reason meets the maxim half-way. This procedure, whether or not it can be justified in our own impartial judgment, shows that we really do acknowledge the validity of the categorical imperative and allow ourselves (while keeping a wary eye on it) only a

few exceptions—ones that strike us as unimportant and as forced on us.

I have thus at least shown that if *duty* is a concept that is to have significance and actual law-giving authority for our actions, it has to be expressed in categorical imperatives, never in hypothetical ones. And along with that I have made clear—and ready for any use—the *content* that the categorical imperative must have if it is to contain the principle of all duty (if there is such a thing as duty). This is a substantial result; but I haven't yet reached the point where I can prove *a priori* that •this kind of imperative really exists, that •there is a practical law that of itself commands absolutely and without any action-drivers, and that •obedience to this law is duty.

If we want to reach that point, it is extremely important that we pay heed to this warning:

Don't slip into thinking that the reality of this principle can be derived from the *special constitution of human nature!*

For duty has to be practical-and-unconditional necessity of action; so it has to hold for all rational beings (the only beings to which an imperative has anything to say), and is a law for all human wills *only because they are rational beings*. In contrast with that, anything that is derived from

- the temperament of human beings in particular, from
- certain feelings and propensities •of human beings, or even from (if this is possible)
- a particular tendency of the human *reason* that might not hold for the will of every rational being,

—such a thing can yield a •*maxim* that is valid for us, but not a •*law*. That is, it can yield •a subjective principle on which we might act if our desires and dispositions take us that way, but not •an objective principle telling us how to act even if all our dispositions, preferences, and natural tendencies