Kantian Ethics: the categorical imperative

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Imperatives: hypothetical vs categorical

What is an *imperative?*

> All imperatives are expressed by an 'ought'. [413: 37]

All imperatives command either *hypothetically* or *categorically.* (Could all imperatives be hypothetical imperatives? Kant thinks not. If so, we would face a *regress.*)

- **Hypothetical Imperatives** declare a possible action to be practically necessary as a means to the attainment of something else that one wills, or may will.

All hypothetical imperatives are of the following form:

⌜**If you have [END], you ought to [MEANS to that END].**⌝

Can you think of any examples of hypothetical imperatives?

- **The Categorical Imperative** would be an imperative which represented an action as objectively necessary *in itself* apart from its relation to a further end.

It seems like most of our 'ought'-talk in ordinary, everyday English expresses hypothetical imperatives. Are there any categorical imperatives? Kant says: *Yes!*

The Categorical Imperative

Consider the following imperatives. Are they categorical? (1) *"You should keep your promises because it is the will of God that you should do so."* (2) *"You should give your money to OXFAM because you can save the lives of starving children."* (3) *"You should kill the one to save the five because that will maximize total utility."*

> **The Categorical Imperative:**
> There is, therefore, only a single categorical imperative and it is this: *act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.* [Kant, 4: 421]

Example: don't make false promises

Kant illustrates the idea behind the categorical imperative by considering four different cases. Here's one:

Here are some examples:
- "Close the door!"
- "Staple your essays!"
- "Eat your vegetables!"
- "Don't torture animals!"

We can paraphrase each of the above using an 'ought'-claim.

(Because one cannot will some end without thereby willing the necessary means to that end, Kant takes these imperatives to be both *a priori* and *analytic*).

The categorical imperatives tells us what we ought to do *unconditionally*.

(Because a categorical imperative is unconditional, we cannot derive its prescriptions from some other condition. For this reason, Kant takes the categorical imperative to be *a priori* — it is something we can figure out from the armchair — but *synthetic* — it is true or false in virtue of something more than just the meaning of its terms.)

Here is a way to get a handle on the idea. Ask yourself, "What if everyone did this?" Roughly, the categorical imperative says "Don't make an exception of yourself!"

The False Promise. Suppose that you'd like some quick cash. You know that you could borrow some money from a friend, on the condition that you promise to pay her back. You have no intention of paying her back. But you could make a *false promise* — tell her that you will pay her back even though you know you won't. Should you?

No. You should not. Doing so violates the categorical imperative. How so?

The Categorical Imperative Test: false promise.

(1) *Formulate the Maxim.* You are deliberating about whether to perform some action to achieve a certain end. Maxims are of the following form:

⌜**I will do [ACTION] in order to achieve [END].**⌝

In this case, then, your maxim is this: *"I will make a false promise in order to get some quick money."*

(2) **Universalize the Maxim into a Law of Nature.** Turn your maxim into a universal law. In this case, the universal law that corresponds to your maxim would be this:

Everyone who wants to get some quick cash makes a false promise.

Imagine a world, a lot like ours, but in which this is a Law of Nature.

(3) **Imagine Trying to Will Your Maxim in Such a World.** What would the world be like if your maxim were a universally followed Law of Nature? Imagine such a world. Then imagine trying to will your maxim in such a world. Can you do it?

(4) **Contradiction Step.** Is there a contradiction that follows when you imagine trying to will your maxim in a world in which your maxim is a universally followed Law of Nature?

What is the contradiction here? Do you agree with Kant that one cannot will the maxim be a universal law of nature without contradiction? (What are some other possible actions that will violate Kant's test?)

Perfect vs Imperfect Duties

Kant thinks that there are two different kinds of contradictions that can arise.

1. **Perfect Duty.** The maxim cannot even be thought of as a universal law of nature without contradiction. Maxims which fail the test for this reason give rise to *perfect duties.*

2. **Imperfect Duty.** The maxim can be conceived as a universal law of nature, but it would be contradictory to *will* such a maxim were it a universal law. Maxims which fail the test for this reason give rise to *imperfect duties.*

For, the universality of a law that everyone, when he believes himself to be in need, could promise whatever he pleases with the intention of not keeping it would make the promise and the end one might have in it itself impossible, since *no one would believe what was promised to him but would laugh at all such expressions as vain pretenses.* [Kant 4: 422]

Korsgaard distinguishes between three different ways to interpret what Kant has in mind by 'contradiction' here:

1. *Logical Contradiction:* it is literally inconceivable that one will the maxim in a world in which the maxim is a universal law.

2. *Teleological Contradiction:* there is a contradiction in willing the maxim as a universal teleological law; making the maxim a universal law violates the very purpose that the maxim was supposed to serve.

3. *Practical Contradiction:* if the maxim were a universal law, the maxim's ability to achieve the purpose you want it to would be undermined; it would no longer serve your ends to act on such a maxim.

Examples of **Perfect Duties:** "keep your promises," "don't lie," "don't violate someone's rights," etc.

Examples of **Imperfect Duties:** "help others when they are in need of help," "make the best use of your talents," etc.