

anywhere is in sufficiently dire need: family relationships, especially the duty to care for and educate one's children; friendship and community relationships, of varying degrees of scope; personal goals or projects of any sort that do not contribute directly to such aid; and voluntarily undertaken obligations of many sorts to other

people that do not affect their survival. And also, whether you or your society or country are in any way responsible for the people in question being in such dire need; and whether and to what degree they are themselves responsible for their situation. Is Singer right that *none* of these considerations make any moral difference?

Deontological Views: Morality Depends on Duties and Rights

Immanuel Kant

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was one of the most important and influential philosophers of all time. Kant made major contributions to epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, the philosophy of religion, aesthetics, and many other areas. His central concern was to explain and vindicate the authority and autonomy of *reason*, both *theoretical* reason (pertaining to factual and especially scientific knowledge of the world) and *practical* reason (pertaining to action and morality).

In the following selection from the first of his major ethical works, Kant attempts to derive and defend what he regards as the fundamental principle of morality: the *categorical imperative*. The starting point is the idea that morality must not depend on any motive or goal that might not be shared by others, but must instead be valid for any rational being. Kant attempts to show in effect that this very requirement can by itself lead to the moral principle he is seeking. He offers several different formulations of this principle; these are supposed to amount to the same thing, but this is by no means obviously the case.

From *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*

First Section/Transition from the Common Rational Knowledge of Morals to the Philosophical

Nothing in the world—indeed nothing even beyond the world—can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a *good will*. ① Intelligence, wit, judgment, and the other talents of the mind, however they may be named, or courage, resoluteness, and perseverance as qualities of temperament, are doubtless in many respects good and desirable. But they can become extremely bad and harmful if the will, which is to make use of these gifts of nature and which in its special constitution is

called character, is not good. It is the same with the gifts of fortune. Power, riches, honor, even health, general well-being, and the contentment with one's condition which is called happiness, make for pride and even arrogance if there is not a good will to correct their influence on the mind and on its principles of action so as to make it universally conformable to its end. ② It need hardly be mentioned that the sight of a being adorned with no feature of a pure and good will, yet enjoying uninterrupted prosperity, can never give pleasure to a rational impartial observer. Thus the good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition even of worthiness to be happy.

Some qualities seem to be conducive to this good will and can facilitate its action, but, in spite of that, they have no intrinsic unconditional worth. They rather presuppose a good

From Kant: *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, edited by Robert Paul Wolff (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

1

 By a “good will,” Kant means one that is motivated only by the demands of moral duty (not a will that is benevolent or generous, as the phrase is more standardly used).

2

 All of these things can, in the absence of a good will, lead to actions and results that are morally bad.

will, which limits the high esteem which one otherwise rightly has for them and prevents their being held to be absolutely good. Moderation in emotions and passions, self-control, and calm deliberation not only are good in many respects but even seem to constitute a part of the inner worth of the person. But however unconditionally they were esteemed by the ancients, they are far from being good without qualification. For without the principle of a good will they can become extremely bad, and the coolness of a villain makes him not only far more dangerous but also more directly abominable in our eyes than he would have seemed without it. **3**

The good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes or because of its adequacy to achieve some proposed end; it is good only because of its willing, i.e., it is good of itself. And, regarded for itself, it is to be esteemed incomparably higher than anything which could be brought about by it in favor of any inclination or even of the sum total of all inclinations. Even if it should happen that, by a particularly unfortunate fate or by the niggardly provision of a step-motherly nature, this will should be wholly lacking in power to accomplish its purpose, and if even the greatest effort should not avail it to achieve anything of its end, and if there remained only the good will (not as a mere wish but as the summoning of all the means in our power), it would sparkle like a jewel in its own right, as something that had its full worth in itself. Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither diminish nor augment this worth. . . .

We have, then, to develop the concept of a will which is to be esteemed as good of itself without regard to anything else. It dwells already in the natural sound understanding and does not need so much to be taught as only to be brought to light. In the estimation of the total worth of our actions it always takes first place and is the condition of everything else. In order to show this, we shall take the concept of duty. It contains that of a good will, though with certain subjective restrictions and hindrances; but these are far from concealing it and making it unrecognizable, for they rather bring it out by contrast and make it shine forth all the brighter.

I here omit all actions which are recognized as opposed to duty, even though they may be useful in one respect or another, for with these the question does not arise at all as to whether they

may be carried out *from* duty, since they conflict with it. I also pass over the actions which are really in accordance with duty and to which one has no direct inclination, rather executing them because impelled to do so by another inclination. For it is easily decided whether an action in accord with duty is performed from duty or for some selfish purpose. It is far more difficult to note this difference when the action is in accordance with duty and, in addition, the subject has a direct inclination to do it. For example, it is in fact in accordance with duty that a dealer should not overcharge an inexperienced customer, and wherever there is much business the prudent merchant does not do so, having a fixed price for everyone, so that a child may buy of him as cheaply as any other. Thus the customer is honestly served. But this is far from sufficient to justify the belief that the merchant has behaved in this way from duty and principles of honesty. His own advantage required this behavior; but it cannot be assumed that over and above that he had a direct inclination to the purchaser and that, out of love, as it were, he gave none an advantage in price over another. Therefore the action was done neither from duty nor from direct inclination but only for a selfish purpose. **4**

...

To be kind where one can is duty, and there are, moreover, many persons so sympathetically constituted that without any motive of vanity or selfishness they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy, and rejoice in the contentment of others which they have made possible. But I say that, however dutiful and amiable it may be, that kind of action has no true moral worth. It is on a level with [actions arising from] other inclinations, such as the inclination to honor, which, if fortunately directed to what in fact accords with duty and is generally useful and thus honorable, deserve praise and encouragement but no esteem. For the maxim **5** lacks the moral import of an action done not from inclination but from duty. But assume that the mind of that friend to mankind was clouded by a sorrow of his own which extinguished all sympathy with the lot of others and that he still had the power to benefit others in distress, but that their need left him untouched because he was preoccupied with his own need. And now suppose him to tear himself, unsolicited by inclination, out of this

3

R Again, the point is that the various character traits in question can lead to results that are morally bad or evil if not accompanied by a good will.

4

R The shopkeeper's action conforms to the demands of moral duty (that is, the shopkeeper does what duty would require), but the action still has no moral worth if done only from the motive of self-interest. The shopkeeper has done the right thing for the wrong reason.

(Contrary to what the wording of the last sentence might suggest, Kant is not saying that this must always be the case.)

5

A A maxim is the practical principle that an agent is subjectively following: to do a certain sort of thing in a certain sort of situation for a certain sort of reason. In effect, it is a generalized version of the person's conscious intention in doing the action.

dead insensibility and to perform this action only from duty and without any inclination—then for the first time his action has genuine moral worth. Furthermore, if nature has put little sympathy in the heart of a man, and if he, though an honest man, is by temperament cold and indifferent to the sufferings of others, perhaps because he is provided with special gifts of patience and fortitude and expects or even requires that others should have the same—and such a man would certainly not be the meanest product of nature—would not he find in himself a source from which to give himself a far higher worth than he could have got by having a good-natured temperament? This is unquestionably true even though nature did not make him philanthropic, for it is just here that the worth of the character is brought out, which is morally and incomparably the highest of all: he is benevolent not from inclination but from duty. **6**

...

[Thus the first proposition of morality is that to have moral worth an action must be done from duty.] The second proposition is: An action performed from duty does not have its moral worth in the purpose which is to be achieved through it but in the maxim by which it is determined. Its moral value, therefore, does not depend on the realization of the object of the action but merely on the principle of volition by which the action is done without any regard to the objects of the faculty of desire. From the preceding discussion it is clear that the purposes we may have for our actions and their effects as ends and incentives of the will cannot give the actions any unconditional and moral worth. Wherein, then, can this worth lie, if it is not in the will in relation to its hoped-for effect? It can lie nowhere else than in the principle of the will, irrespective of the ends which can be realized by such action. **7** ...

The third principle, as a consequence of the two preceding, I would express as follows: Duty is the necessity of an action executed from respect for law. I can certainly have an inclination to the object as an effect of the proposed action, but I can never have respect for it precisely because it is a mere effect and not an activity of a will. Similarly, I can have no respect for any inclination whatsoever, whether my own or that of another; in the former case

I can at most approve of it and in the latter I can even love it, i.e., see it as favorable to my own advantage. But that which . . . does not serve my inclination but overpowers it or at least excludes it from being considered in making a choice—in a word, law itself—can be an object of respect and thus a command. Now as an act from duty wholly excludes the influence of inclination and therewith every object of the will, nothing remains which can determine the will objectively except the law, and nothing subjectively except pure respect for this practical law. This subjective element is the maxim that I ought to follow such a law even if it thwarts all my inclinations. **8**

...

But what kind of a law can that be, the conception of which must determine the will without reference to the expected result? Under this condition alone the will can be called absolutely good without qualification. Since I have robbed the will of all impulses which could come to it from obedience to any law, nothing remains to serve as a principle of the will except universal conformity of its action to law as such. That is, I should never act in such a way that I could not also will that my maxim should be a universal law. **9** Mere conformity to law as such (without assuming any particular law applicable to certain actions) serves as the principle of the will, and it must serve as such a principle if duty is not to be a vain delusion and chimerical concept. . . .

6

R Persons who help or benefit others because they have a spontaneous inclination toward sympathy (or benevolence or generosity) are, like the shopkeeper, doing what they want to do and not acting out of duty; thus their actions, while worthy of praise and encouragement, have no real *moral* worth. The person worthy of moral esteem is the one who has no desire or inclination at all to help anyone, who "is by temperament cold and indifferent," but who helps others out of moral duty alone. (See Discussion Question 1.)

7

R Kant concludes that moral value must derive from a principle of action that does not depend on any purpose or goal toward which we may have an inclination.

 (This is very puzzling: how can a principle have any definite content if not in relation to some purpose or goal?)

8

R Thus a dutiful action must derive from respect for (moral) law, not from any specific inclinations that the person might happen to have.

 (Again, how does this moral or practical law come to have any specific content?)

9

R Lacking any specific purpose, the content of the moral law can only derive from the fact that it is supposed to be a *universal* law, a law that governs all rational beings. Thus the fundamental moral requirement (elaborated much further later on) is that the maxim of my action must be capable of being a universal law that a rational being can will to hold. (It is still unclear at this point how this will result in any definite content.)

10

R That is, will is the faculty in us that derives practical results (actions) from the requirements of reason.

Second Section/Transition from the Popular Moral Philosophy to the Metaphysics of Morals

...

Everything in nature works according to laws. Only a rational being has the capacity of acting according to the conception of laws, i.e., according to principles. This capacity is will. Since reason is required for the derivation of actions from laws, will is nothing else than practical reason. **10** If reason infallibly determines the will, the actions which such a being recognizes as objectively necessary are also subjectively necessary. That is, the will is a faculty of choosing only that which reason, independently of inclination, recognizes as practically necessary, i.e., as good. . . .

The conception of an objective principle so far as it constrains a will, is a command (of reason), and the formula of this command is called an *imperative*.

11

 An imperative, being a command of reason, holds for any rational being. When pleasure influences the will, this does not normally involve any command of reason and will vary from person to person, because different people find different things pleasant.

12

 Hypothetical imperatives depend on actual or possible desires (inclinations), while categorical imperatives do not.

 (Given the previous discussion, it follows that an imperative of morality must be categorical rather than hypothetical, because it cannot depend on any specific desire or inclination.)

All imperatives are expressed by an "ought" and thereby indicate the relation of an objective law of reason to a will which is not in its subjective constitution necessarily determined by this law. This relation is that of constraint. Imperatives say that it would be good to do or to refrain from doing something, but they say it to a will which does not always do something simply because it is presented as a good thing to do. Practical good is what determines the will by means of the conception of reason and hence not by subjective causes but, rather, objectively, i.e., on grounds which are valid for every rational being as such. It is distinguished from the pleasant as that which has an influence on the will only by means of a sensation from merely subjective causes, which hold only for the senses of this or that person and not as a principle of reason which holds for everyone. **11**

...

All imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically. The former present the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else which one desires (or which one may possibly desire). The categorical imperative would be one which presented an action as of itself objectively necessary, without regard to any other end. **12**

Since every practical law presents a possible action as good and thus as necessary for a subject practically determinable by reason, all imperatives are formulas of the determination of action which is necessary by the principle of a will which is in any way good. If the action is good only as a means to something else, the imperative is hypothetical; but if it is thought of as good in itself, and hence as necessary in a will which of itself conforms to reason as the principle of this will, the imperative is categorical.

...

The hypothetical imperative, therefore, says only that the action is good to some purpose, possible or actual. In the former case it is a problematical, in the latter an assertorical, practical principle. The categorical imperative, which declares the action to be of itself objectively

necessary without making any reference to a purpose, i.e., without having any other end, holds as an apodictical (practical) principle. **13**

We can think of that which is possible through the mere powers of some rational being as a possible purpose of any will. As a consequence, the principles of action, in so far as they are thought of as necessary to attain a possible purpose which can be achieved by them, are in reality infinitely numerous. . . .

There is one end, however, which we may presuppose as actual in all rational beings so far as imperatives apply to them, i.e., so far as they are dependent beings; there is one purpose not only which they *can* have but which we can presuppose that they all *do* have by a necessity of nature. This purpose is happiness. The hypothetical imperative which represents the practical necessity of action as means to the promotion of happiness is an assertorical imperative. We may not expound it as merely necessary to an uncertain and a merely possible purpose, but as necessary to a purpose which we can a priori and with assurance assume for everyone because it belongs to his essence. Skill in the choice of means to one's own highest welfare can be called prudence in the narrowest sense. Thus the imperative which refers to the choice of means to one's own happiness, i.e., the precept of prudence, is still only hypothetical; the action is not absolutely commanded but commanded only as a means to another end.

Finally, there is one imperative which directly commands a certain conduct without making its condition some purpose to be reached by it. This imperative is categorical. It concerns not the material of the action and its intended result but the form and the principle from which it results. **14** What is essentially good in it consists in the intention, the result being what it may. This imperative may be called the imperative of morality.

Volition according to these three principles is plainly distinguished by dissimilarity in the constraint to which they subject the will. In order to clarify this dissimilarity, I believe that they are most suitably named if one says that they are either rules of skill, counsels of prudence, or commands (laws) of morality, respectively. . . .

The question now arises: how are all these imperatives possible? This question does not

14

 Since there are no specific purposes or ends in question, a categorical imperative cannot concern the relation of the action to such an end. Kant concludes that it can only concern the *form* of the action: the general kind of action that it is. (But it is still not clear at this point what this means.)

require an answer as to how the action which the imperative commands can be performed but merely as to how the constraint of the will, which the imperative expresses in the problem, can be conceived. How an imperative of skill is possible requires no particular discussion. Whoever wills the end, so far as reason has decisive influence on his action, wills also the indispensably necessary means to it that lie in his power. **15** ...

If it were only easy to give a definite concept of happiness, the imperatives of prudence would completely correspond to those of skill. . . . For it could be said in this case as well as in the former that whoever wills the end wills also (necessarily according to reason) the only means to it which are in his power. But it is a misfortune that the concept of happiness is so indefinite that, although each person wishes to attain it, he can never definitely and self-consistently state what it is he really wishes and wills. **16** . . .

To see how the imperative of morality is possible is, then, without doubt the only question needing an answer. It is not hypothetical, and thus the objectively conceived necessity cannot be supported by any presupposition, as was the case with the hypothetical imperatives. But it must not be overlooked that it cannot be shown by any example (i.e., it cannot be empirically shown) whether or not there is such an imperative. . . . we cannot show with certainty by any example that the will is here determined by the law alone without any other incentives, even though this appears to be the case. For it is always possible that secret fear of disgrace, and perhaps also obscure apprehension of other dangers, may have had an influence on the will. Who can prove by experience the nonexistence of a cause when experience shows us only that we do not perceive the cause? But in such a case the so-called moral imperative, which as such appears to be categorical and unconditional, would be actually only a pragmatic precept which makes us attentive to our own advantage and teaches us to consider it. **17**

Thus we shall have to investigate purely a priori the possibility of a categorical imperative, for we do not have the advantage that experience would give us the reality of this imperative, so that the [demonstration of its] possibility would be necessary only for its explanation and not for its establishment. In the meantime, this much may at least be seen: the categorical imperative alone can be taken as a practical *law*, while all the others may be called principles of the will but not laws. This is because what is necessary merely for the attainment of an arbitrary purpose can be regarded as itself contingent, and we get rid of the precept once we give up the purpose, whereas the unconditional command leaves the will no freedom to choose the opposite. Thus it alone implies the necessity which we require of a law.

...

In attacking this problem, we will first inquire whether the mere concept of a categorical imperative does not also furnish the formula containing the proposition which alone can be a categorical imperative. . . . **18**

If I think of a hypothetical imperative as such, I do not know what it will contain until the condition is stated [under which it is an imperative]. But if I think of a categorical imperative, I know immediately what it contains. For since the imperative contains besides the law only the necessity that the maxim* should accord with this law, while the law contains no condition to which it is restricted, there is nothing remaining in it except the universality of law as such to which the maxim of the action should conform; and in effect this conformity alone is represented as necessary by the imperative.

There is, therefore, only one categorical imperative. It is: Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. **19**

...

15

R It would make no sense to will an end without willing an "indispensably necessary means," so any rational being that wills the end also wills the means—which is what a "rule of skill" (a problematical principle) says.

16

R The analogous point holds for most "counsels of prudence" (assertorical principles). But for the key case where the goal is happiness, the uncertainty pertaining to both the nature of happiness and the means required to attain it make it quite possible for a rational being to will the end and fail to will the means—as we often discover later, to our regret.

17

R The possibility of categorical imperatives cannot be established empirically by citing actual cases of actions where there is no specific end or purpose, since it is always possible that there is some end (such as fear of disgrace) that even the agent is unaware of.

18

 Here is the key idea, already hinted at earlier (see Annotation 9 and the corresponding passage): the very idea of a categorical imperative, one not deriving from any specific end or purpose, will also (somehow) determine the content of such an imperative.

19

R According to the idea of the categorical imperative, the maxim of the action must conform to a universal law, one valid for all rational beings. Since there is no basis for any more specific content, the categorical imperative can say only that the maxim of one's action must be such as to make this possible: something that could be a universal law and could be willed by the agent to have this status. This is Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative.

*A maxim is the subjective principle of acting and must be distinguished from the objective principle, i.e., the practical law. The former contains the practical rule which reason determines according to the conditions of the subject (often its ignorance or inclinations) and is thus 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 it ought to act, i.e., an imperative.

The universality of law according to which effects are produced constitutes what is properly called nature in the most general sense (as to form), i.e., the existence of things so far as it is determined by universal laws. [By analogy], then, the universal imperative of duty can be expressed as follows: Act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature.

20

 A perfect duty is one that strictly requires certain specific actions, with no choice or leeway; an imperfect duty is one that can be fulfilled in several different ways, among which the agent may choose, and thus no one of which is strictly required.

We shall now enumerate some duties, adopting the usual division of them into duties to ourselves and to others and into perfect and imperfect duties.²⁰

1. A man who is reduced to despair by a series of evils feels a weariness with life but is still in possession of his reason sufficiently to ask whether it would not be contrary to his duty to himself to take his own life. Now he asks whether the maxim of his action could become a universal law of nature. His maxim, however, is: For love of myself, I make it my principle to shorten my life when by a longer duration it threatens more evil than satisfaction. But it is questionable whether this principle of self-love could become a universal law of nature. One immediately sees a contradiction in a system of nature whose law would be to destroy life by the feeling whose special office is to impel the improvement of life. In this case it would not exist as nature; hence that maxim cannot obtain as a law of nature, and thus it wholly contradicts the supreme principle of all duty.²¹

2. Another man finds himself forced by need to borrow money. He well knows that he will not be able to repay it, but he also sees that nothing will be loaned him if he does not firmly promise to repay it at a certain time. He desires to make such a promise, but he has enough conscience to ask himself whether it is not improper and opposed to duty to relieve his distress in such a way. Now, assuming he does decide to do so, the maxim of his action would be as follows: When I believe myself to be in need of money, I will borrow money and promise to repay it, although I know I shall never do so. Now this principle of self-love or of his own benefit may very well be compatible with his whole future welfare, but the question is whether it is right. He changes the pretension of self-love into a universal law

and then puts the question: How would it be if my maxim became a universal law? He immediately sees that it could never hold as a universal law of nature and be consistent with itself; rather it must necessarily contradict itself. For the universality of a law which says that anyone who believes himself to be in need could promise what he pleased with the intention of not fulfilling it would make the promise itself and the end to be accomplished by it impossible; no one would believe what was promised to him but would only laugh at any such assertion as vain pretense.²²

3. A third finds in himself a talent which could by means of some cultivation, make him in many respects a useful man. But he finds himself in comfortable circumstances and prefers indulgence in pleasure to troubling himself with broadening and improving his fortunate natural gifts. Now, however, let him ask whether his maxim of neglecting his gift, besides agreeing with his propensity to idle amusement, agrees also with what is called duty. He sees that a system of nature could indeed exist in accordance with such a law even though man (like the inhabitants of the South Sea Islands) should let his talents rust and resolve to devote his life merely to idleness, indulgence, and propagation—in a word, to pleasure. But he cannot 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 faculties should be developed inasmuch as they are given to him for all sorts of possible purposes.²³
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 asks, "What concern of mine is it? Let each one be as happy as heaven wills, or as he can make himself; I will not take anything from him or even envy him; but to his welfare or to his assistance in time of need I have no desire to contribute." If such a way of thinking were a universal law of nature, certainly the human race could exist, and without doubt even better than in a state where everyone talks of sympathy and good will, or even exerts himself occasionally to practice them while, on the other hand, he cheats when he can or betrays or otherwise violates the rights of

21

 Kant's claim is that the maxim of this proposed action could not be a universal law because it is **contradictory** when made universal. Can you see a clear contradiction? (See Discussion Question 2.)

22

 Here again the claim is that the maxim of the action becomes contradictory when made universal. This is a more plausible case in that there is a way in which the universalized maxim would (probably?) be self-defeating. But is it really contradictory? (See Discussion Question 2.)

23

 The alleged problem is different in this case: the maxim can be made universal without contradiction, but (it is claimed) the person cannot *will* this universalized maxim to be a law because any rational being necessarily wills something that contradicts it (so that the problem is still contradiction, but this time within the will itself, rather than within the universalized maxim).
 (But is there any clear reason why a rational being must will that all his faculties be developed—indeed, is this even possible? See Discussion Question 3.)

man. Now although it is possible that a universal law of nature according to that maxim could exist, it is nevertheless impossible to will that such a principle should hold everywhere as a law of nature. For a will which resolved this would conflict with itself, since instances can often arise in which he would need the love and sympathy of others, and in which he would have robbed himself, by such a law of nature springing from his own will, of all hope of the aid he desires.²⁴

The foregoing are a few of the many actual duties, or at least of duties we hold to be actual, whose derivation from the one stated principle is clear. We must be able to will that a maxim of our action become a universal law; this is the canon of the moral estimation of our action generally. Some actions are of such a nature that their maxim cannot even be *thought* as a universal law of nature without contradiction, far from it being possible that one could will that it should be such. In others this internal impossibility is not found, though it is still impossible to will that their maxim should be raised to the universality of a law of nature, because such a will would contradict itself. We easily see that the former maxim conflicts with the stricter or narrower (impermissible) duty, the latter with broader (meritorious) duty.²⁵ Thus all duties, so far as the kind of obligation (not the object of their action) is concerned, have been completely exhibited by these examples in their dependence on the one principle.

When we observe ourselves in any transgression of a duty, we find that we do not actually will that our maxim should become a universal law. That is impossible for us; rather, the contrary of this maxim should remain as a law generally, and we only take the liberty of making an exception to it for ourselves or for the sake of our inclination, and for this one occasion. Consequently, if we weighed everything from one and the same standpoint, namely, reason, we would come upon a contradiction in our own will, viz., that a certain principle is objectively necessary as a universal law and yet subjectively does not hold universally but rather admits exceptions. . . .

We have thus at least established that if duty is a concept which is to have significance and actual legislation for our actions, it can be

expressed only in categorical imperatives and not at all in hypothetical ones. For every application of it we have also clearly exhibited the content of the categorical imperative which must contain the principle of all duty (if there is such). This is itself very much. But we are not yet advanced far enough to prove a priori that that kind of imperative really exists, that there is a practical law which of itself commands absolutely and without any incentives, and that obedience to this law is duty.²⁶

...

The will is thought of as a faculty of determining itself to action in accordance with the conception of certain laws. Such a faculty can be found only in rational beings. That which serves the will as the objective ground of its self-determination is an end, and, if it is given by reason alone, it must hold alike for all rational beings. On the other hand, that which contains the ground of the possibility of the action, whose result is an end, is called the means. The subjective ground of desire is the incentive, while the objective ground of volition is the motive. Thus arises the distinction between subjective ends, which rest on incentives, and objective ends, which depend on motives valid for every rational being. Practical principles are formal when they disregard all subjective ends; they are material when they have subjective ends, and thus certain incentives, as their basis. The ends which a rational being arbitrarily proposes to himself as consequences of his action are material ends and are without exception only relative, for only their relation to a particularly constituted faculty of desire in the subject gives them their worth. And this worth cannot, therefore, afford any universal principles for all rational beings or valid and necessary principles for every volition. That is, they cannot give rise to any practical laws. All these relative ends, therefore, are grounds for hypothetical imperatives only.

But suppose that there were something the existence of which in itself had absolute worth, something which, as an end in itself, could be a ground of definite laws. In it and only in it could lie the ground of a possible categorical imperative, i.e., of a practical law.²⁷

Now, I say, man and, in general, every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely

24

 The second case of an alleged conflict within the will itself is again more plausible. But is it really true that no one could fail to will that he be helped when in need? (See Discussion Question 3.)

25

 Kant summarizes the two ways that the categorical imperative can fail to be satisfied by the maxim of an action. The first corresponds to perfect duties, the second to imperfect duties: on Kant's view, one may never commit suicide in the face of misfortune or make a promise while knowing that one will not be able to keep it; but one has a choice of which talents to develop (he now seems to recognize that not all can be fully developed) and of which people to help (no one can help everyone).

26

 The reason for the uncertainty expressed here is not entirely clear. The idea seems to be that the ultimate point of the moral law is not yet clear. Specific, optional purposes or ends have been ruled out, but Kant will suggest that there is a certain unconditional end that any rational being must have.

27

 Think again about the idea of a categorical imperative: one that is binding on any rational being, no matter what specific purposes it may or may not have. An end that had absolute worth would work for such an imperative; and, Kant is saying, only an end with such worth could supply such a basis. In what follows, Kant proclaims (is there any real argument?) that rational beings are themselves ends with absolute as opposed to merely conditional worth.

28

STOP This claim reflects the rather austere character of Kant's moral thought: according to him, a rational being would want to have no contingent inclinations at all—no desires for anything that does not have absolute worth. What would life be like for such a being? (How many, if any, of your current desires would satisfy this standard?)

29

R The existence of a rational being is an end in itself. It is thus a fundamental mistake to regard or treat such a being as merely a means to something else (which could only be something with merely contingent, conditional worth).

30

 Here is the second formulation of the categorical imperative, supposedly just another formulation of the same universal moral law. It is important to stress that persons are never to be treated "as a means only," that is, never merely as a means—not that they may never be treated in any respect as a means (which would make most forms of human interaction impossible).

31

 On the surface, this is a different reason for the moral unacceptability of suicide in the face of misfortune: it treats a person (the person who commits suicide) as a means to the end of escaping the misfortune in question. (But is this really so? See Discussion Question 4.)

32

 This is the clearest example of the application of the second version of the categorical imperative—and probably the best and clearest of all of Kant's specific examples.

as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will. In all his actions, whether they are directed to himself or to other rational beings, he must always be regarded at the same time as an end. All objects of inclinations have only a conditional worth, for if the inclinations and the needs founded on them did not exist, their object would be without worth. The inclinations themselves as the sources of needs, however, are so lacking in absolute worth that the universal wish of every rational being must be indeed to free himself completely from them.²⁸ Therefore, the worth of any objects to be obtained by our actions is at all times conditional. Beings whose existence does not depend on our will but on nature, if they are not rational beings, have only a relative worth as means and are therefore called "things"; on the other hand, rational beings are designated "persons" because their nature indicates that they are ends in themselves, i.e., things which may not be used merely as means. Such a being is thus an object of respect and, so far, restricts all [arbitrary] choice. Such beings are not merely subjective ends whose existence as a result of our action has a worth for us, but are objective ends, i.e., beings whose existence in itself is an end. Such an end is one for which no other end can be substituted, to which these beings should serve merely as means.²⁹ For, without them, nothing of absolute worth could be found, and if all worth is conditional and thus contingent, no supreme practical principle for reason could be found anywhere.

Thus if there is to be a supreme practical principle and a categorical imperative for the human will, it must be one that forms an objective principle of the will from the conception of that which is necessarily an end for everyone because it is an end in itself. Hence this objective principle can serve as a universal practical law. The ground of this principle is: rational nature exists as an end in itself. Man necessarily thinks of his own existence in this way; thus far it is a subjective principle of human actions. Also every other rational being thinks of his existence by means of the same rational ground which holds also for myself; thus it is at the same time an objective principle from which, as a supreme practical ground, it must be possible to derive all laws of the will. The practical imperative, therefore, is the following: Act so that you treat

humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.³⁰ Let us now see whether this can be achieved.

To return to our previous examples:

First, according to the concept of necessary duty to one's self, he who contemplates suicide will ask himself whether his action can be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself. If, in order to escape from burdensome circumstances, he destroys himself, he uses a person merely as a means to maintain a tolerable condition up to the end of life. Man however, is not a thing, and thus not something to be used merely as a means; he must always be regarded in all his actions as an end in himself. Therefore, I cannot dispose of man in my own person so as to mutilate, corrupt, or kill him.³¹ (It belongs to ethics proper to define more accurately this basic principle so as to avoid all misunderstanding, e.g., as to the amputation of limbs in order to preserve myself, or to exposing my life to danger in order to save it; I must therefore, omit them here.)

Second, as concerns necessary or obligatory duties to others, he who intends a deceitful promise to others sees immediately that he intends to use another man merely as a means without the latter containing the end in himself at the same time. For he whom I want to use for my own purposes by means of such a promise cannot possibly assent to my mode of acting against him and cannot contain the end of this action in himself. This conflict against the principle of other men is even clearer if we cite examples of attacks on their freedom and property. For then it is clear that he who transgresses the rights of men intends to make use of the persons of others merely as a means, without considering that, as rational beings, they must always be esteemed at the same time as ends, i.e. only as beings who must be able to contain in themselves the end of the very same action.³²

Third, with regard to contingent (meritorious) duty to one's self, it is not sufficient that the action not conflict with humanity in our person as an end in itself; it must also harmonize with it. Now in humanity there are capacities for greater perfection which belong to the end of nature with respect to humanity in our own person; to neglect these might perhaps be consistent with the

preservation of humanity as an end in itself but not with the furtherance of that end.³³

Fourth, with regard to meritorious duty to others, the natural end which all men have is their own happiness. Humanity might indeed exist if no one contributed to the happiness of others, provided he did not intentionally detract from it; but this harmony with humanity as an end in itself is only negative rather than positive if everyone does not also endeavor, so far as he can, to further the ends of others. For the ends of any person, who is an end in himself, must as far as possible also be my end, if that conception of an end in itself is to have its full effect on me.³⁴

...

If we now look back upon all previous attempts which have ever been undertaken to discover the principle of morality, it is not to be wondered at that they all had to fail. Man was seen to be bound to laws by his duty, but it was not seen that he is subject only to his own, yet universal, legislation, and that he is only bound to act in accordance with his own will, which is, however, designed by nature to be a will giving universal laws. For if one thought of him as subject only to a law (whatever it may be), this necessarily implied some interest as a stimulus or compulsion to obedience because the law did not arise from his will. Rather, his will was constrained by something else according to a law to act in a certain way. By this strictly necessary consequence, however, all the labor of finding a supreme ground for duty was irrevocably lost, and one never arrived at duty but only at the necessity of action from a certain interest. This might be his own interest or that of another, but in either case the imperative always had to be conditional and could not at all serve as a moral command. This principle I will call the principle of *autonomy* of the will in contrast to all other principles which I accordingly count under *heteronomy*.³⁵

The concept of each rational being as a being that must regard itself as giving universal law through all the maxims of its will, so that it may judge itself and its actions from this standpoint, leads to a very fruitful concept, namely, that of a *realm of ends*.

By "realm" I understand the systematic union of different rational beings through

common laws. Because laws determine ends with regard to their universal validity, if we abstract from the personal difference of rational beings and thus from all content of their private ends, we can think of a whole of all ends in systematic connection, a whole of rational beings as ends in themselves as well as of the particular ends which each may set for himself. This is a realm of ends, which is possible on the aforesaid principles. For all rational beings stand under the law that each of them should treat himself and all others never merely as means but in every case also as an end in himself. Thus there arises a systematic union of rational beings through common objective laws. This is a realm which may be called a realm of ends (certainly only an ideal), because what these laws have in view is just the relation of these beings to each other as ends and means.³⁶

...

Morality, therefore, consists in the relation of every action to that legislation through which alone a realm of ends is possible. This legislation, however, must be found in every rational being. It must be able to arise from his will, whose principle then is to take no action according to any maxim which would be inconsistent with its being a universal law and thus to act only so that the will through its maxims could regard itself at the same time as universally lawgiving. If now the maxims do not by their nature already necessarily conform to this objective principle of rational beings as universally lawgiving, the necessity of acting according to that principle is called practical constraint, i.e., duty. Duty pertains not to the sovereign in the realm of ends, but rather to each member, and to each in the same degree.

The practical necessity of acting according to this principle, i.e., duty, does not rest at all on feelings, impulses, and inclinations; it rests merely on the relation of rational beings to one another, in which the will of a rational being must always be regarded as legislative, for otherwise it could not be thought of as an end in itself. Reason, therefore, relates every maxim of the will as giving universal laws to every other will and also to every action toward itself; it does so not for the sake of any other practical motive or future advantage but rather from the

33

 How clear is Kant's reasoning in this case? Why does treating one's own humanity as an end in itself require developing one's talents? (See Discussion Question 5.)

34

 Why does the fact (assuming that it is a fact) that another person is an end in himself mean that his ends must also be my ends? Also, how strong is this requirement? (See Discussion Question 6.)

35

 This is a different way of putting the point that only a moral law that arises from the will of a rational being as such (and so is a principle of *autonomy*) can be unconditionally binding. Basing moral principles on anything else (principles of *heteronomy*—literally, being under the dominion of another) will fail to show why rational beings are obliged to follow them.

36

 Here is one more, supposedly equivalent formulation of Kant's central moral idea, which leads to one more formulation of the categorical imperative.

 But exactly what this version adds to the previous two is not particularly clear.

idea of the dignity of a rational being who obeys no law except that which he himself also gives.

...

The three aforementioned ways of presenting the principle of morality are fundamentally only so many formulas of the very same law, and each of them unites the others in itself. There is, nevertheless, a difference in them, but the difference is more subjectively than objectively practical, for it is intended to bring an idea of reason closer to intuition (by means of a certain analogy) and thus nearer to feeling. All maxims have:

1. A form, which consists in universality; and in this respect the formula of the moral imperative requires that the maxims be chosen as though they should hold as universal laws of nature.
2. A material, i.e., an end; in this respect the formula says that the rational being, as by its nature an end and thus as an end in itself, must serve in every maxim as the condition restricting all merely relative and arbitrary ends.
3. A complete determination of all maxims by the formula that all maxims which stem from autonomous legislation ought to harmonize with a possible realm of ends as with a realm of nature.

There is a progression here like that through the categories of the unity of the form of the will (its universality), the plurality of material

(the objects, i.e., the ends), and the all-comprehensiveness or totality of the system of ends. But it is better in moral evaluation to follow the rigorous method and to make the universal formula of the categorical imperative the basis: Act according to the maxim which can at the same time make itself a universal law. But if one wishes to gain a hearing for the moral law, it is very useful to bring one and the same action under the three stated principles and thus, so far as possible, to bring it nearer to intuition.

We can now end where we started, with the concept of an unconditionally good will. That will is absolutely good which cannot be bad, and thus it is a will whose maxim, when made a universal law, can never conflict with itself. Thus this principle is also its supreme law: Always act according to that maxim whose universality as a law you can at the same time will. This is the only condition under which a will can never come into conflict with itself, and such an imperative is categorical. Because the validity of the will, as a universal law for possible actions, has an analogy with the universal connection of the existence of things under universal laws, which is the formal element of nature in general, the categorical imperative can also be expressed as follows: Act according to maxims which can at the same time have themselves as universal laws of nature as their object. Such, then, is the formula of an absolutely good will.

...

Discussion Questions

1. Is Kant right that a person who helps other people out of duty alone is morally superior to someone who acts out of an inclination toward sympathy, generosity, benevolence, and so on? Can you think of any way in which he might defend this claim?
2. In applying the first version of the categorical imperative (see Annotation 19) to the suicide and promising examples, Kant claims that the maxims of the actions in question are *contradictory* when universalized. Is he right about this in either of these cases? The promising case is the more plausible of the two, but is there really a contradiction in supposing that everyone borrows money and promises to repay, but never does so? It is very unlikely that people would be gullible enough to continue to lend money under such circumstances, but is it really *impossible* that they could be that gullible?
3. In the second two cases (talent and charity), Kant claims that although universalizing the maxim can be done without contradiction, *willing* the universalized maxim leads to a conflict or contradiction within the will itself. His argument for this depends on his claim that there are other, conflicting things that a rational being necessarily wills. How plausible is his claim, in each of the two cases, that any rational being necessarily wills the other things in question? Can you imagine a rational being that does not do so?
4. Is a person who commits suicide in order to escape misfortune of some serious sort (ill health, financial catastrophe, loss of a loved one, etc.) using himself as merely a means to an end? What is the end and in what way is the person being used as a means to it? Can you see how someone might argue in some of these cases that suicide is