

## HOW PLAUSIBLE IS KANT'S CLAIM THAT THE IMPERATIVES OF MORALITY ARE CATEGORICAL?

In an analysis concerning Ethics two main positions are available: defining what is *good* and defining what is *right*. To the first belong theories of the kind of Teleology; to the second belongs theories whose aim is to define what *ought* to be, namely Deontology.

Kant's *groundwork* is by definition an important point in the development of deontological theory. The whole argument can be summarized as follows: there are laws of a certain kind that represent our conduct in the world and whose collection can be derivable from one supreme principle. But in order to make such argument valid, it is necessary to make explicit the whole system of morality as defined in the *Groundwork*, in a way that it would be then possible to answer the question: *How plausible is Kant's claim that imperatives of morality are categorical?*

From the assumption determined above, a few questions arise immediately: first of all what kind of laws can be expressed on ethical basis (which is the content of 1\_Kant's methodological system); second: how can only one principle determine the conduct of all human beings (which will be analyzed in 2\_Hypothetical Imperatives and *the* Categorical Imperative); third: how can human beings relate to such arguments (as exposed in 3\_the good will, duty and autonomy); fourth: can all Ethics be related to such principle? (from which we can determine the plausibility of Kant's claim that imperatives of morality are categorical, in 4\_An objection to Kant's moral system).

### 1\_Kant's methodological system.

As stated in the preface of the *Groundwork*, Kant establishes a fundamental picture of knowledge; briefly: he divides it in *Formal* (Logic) and *Material* (Ethics and Physics). While the first can be considered only of one kind, namely rational (therefore non-empirical) and dealing with the laws of thought, the second and third can be of two kinds: rational or empirical. To better understand this point, a further clarification is required: judgments can be of three kinds: *analytic a priori*; *synthetic a posteriori*; *synthetic a priori*.

All *synthetic a priori* judgements constitute what is called *Metaphysics* whose aim is to relate elements about the world (Physics) and what we ought to do (Ethics) in a law-like way. Therefore if experience gives us only an answer about the way things *are*, it is in the *metaphysics of morals* that we determine an understanding of moral requirements<sup>1</sup>.

A further observation is required in the idea of a twofold metaphysics: for Kant derives that rational and empirical parts must always be separated with the former preceding the latter for, as in metaphysics of morals, its pure part "[...] gives a priori laws to [man] as a rational being"<sup>2</sup>. This is a fundamental passage in understanding Kant's moral philosophy, for it implies that not all actions are derivable from a supreme principle, but only those synthetic a priori, so that we can picture a smaller set of 'right' judgments included into the bigger set of all possible judgments and actions. This

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<sup>1</sup> "For the metaphysics of morals has to investigate the idea and principles of a possible pure will, and not actions and conditions of human volition [...]. *Groundwork*, [391].

<sup>2</sup> *Groundwork*, [390].

difference (which will be clearer in the next chapter) is what justifies the indispensability of a metaphysics of morals, for “[...] morals themselves are liable to all kinds of corruption [...]”<sup>3</sup>.

## **2\_Hypothetical Imperatives and *the* Categorical Imperative.**

As stated above, the main aim of the *Groundwork* is to define a *supreme* principle of morality from which all laws, representing what we ought to do, can be derived. To complete such a project, Kant develops it as follows: an analytical research from common cognition to the determination of the supreme principle. However, it is more useful for the purpose of this paper to concentrate, for now, only on the supreme principle itself and then move to the analysis of common cognition in chapter 3.

Imperatives are of a completely different form compared to propositions for they cannot exemplify any true value. Now Kant formulates his ethical theory basing it on imperatives. They can be of two forms: Hypothetical and Categorical. The second can also be divided in other two kinds: ethical and categorical. Ethical imperatives are all categorical, which means that by understanding their structure<sup>4</sup>, we can then understand where they all derive from. An important difference however has to be determined between ethical imperatives and *the* Categorical Imperative: for the latter is only one and from which we can derive numerically different ethical ones. This is indeed why even though all ethical imperatives look different, they are in fact all equivalent.

So a priority can be given to analyzing the main difference between Hypothetical and Categorical Imperatives: in general we can say that all imperatives are implicitly or explicitly hypothetical except those which are *genuinely ethical* (in which case they are categorical). Ethical imperatives are of the form: “Act such and such regardless of your aim”; while hypothetical ones are of a more restrained material conditional form “if... then...”. From such distinction it is clear that while the former are independent of any aim and therefore unconditional, the latter can be analyzed as constituted by a premise (which contains the aim) and a conclusion (which includes the imperative); another important distinction is that, in every hypothetical one, the premise reduce the possibility of universalize such imperative, for it is intended to be referred only to those agents who share the same interest (as included in the premise itself). So it is now clear that if we are looking for something valid in a universal contest, no possibility can be given in accepting hypothetical imperatives as a ground.

Now, having achieved that only imperatives of the form “do such and such” are ethical, how can they all derive from the same source? As stated above, those imperatives that are not hypothetical are *genuinely ethical*, which means (as we have just seen) that no particular aim is involved in. Then for an imperative to be categorical needs not to have any ethical content in itself. Such Imperative as proposed by Kant is as follows:

*Act in such a way that the maxim of your action can be made a principle of universal legislation.*

This is indeed the principle from where all ethical imperatives can be derived.

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<sup>3</sup> *Groundwork*, [390].

<sup>4</sup> This will be the subject of the next chapter.

Therefore, if as Kant says, there is always a maxim implicit in any of our actions, then we should always ask whether we can make such maxim a principle of universal legislation. Now, if we try to derive from the hypothetical 'lie whenever is convenient' the ethical imperative that can be universalized, so that such law can govern all of us, we immediately perceive the risk of incoherency, for if it was *mutually* applied, then nobody would ever believe anybody.

This brings our discussion to the problem of strictly impossibility that lies in the appliance of imperatives, or maximization of hypothetical ones, to an universal context where all rational beings (human and not) are involved; namely, *contradiction in conception* (or of state of affair).

The possibility of universalization implies a second form of Imperative definable as:

*Act in such a way as if you are a member of a community of rational subjects.*

where are expressed two main elements of Kant's philosophy: the possibility of rationality to produce synthetic a priori judgments and the possibility of such judgments to be representative of our moral conduct.

### **3\_The good will, duty and autonomy.**

Even though deductively we have already given an answer to our main question, a proper analysis of how human beings relate to such a argument is needed.

A proper starting point is the definition of will. It is a *good willed* action every action which is made with unconditional value. As defined before, it is unconditional any imperative which is not hypothetical. So intuitively, if our actions and choices are based on the respect for an ethical imperative, with no other aims or end in it, we are then able to define them as morally right.

Now, by defining a particular class of morally good actions, such as those done from *duty*, we can *analytically* define (instead of synthetically, as done in chapter 1) what principle the person of good will acts on. Four cases follow; briefly: actions which are contrary to duty; actions which accord with duty and no immediate inclination but still implying some further ends; actions which accord with duty and some immediate inclinations; actions which accord with duty and contrary to immediate inclinations. The latter is for Kant the *crucial* test case of the will's possible goodness<sup>5</sup>, for it shows that the moral worth of an action doesn't lie in its purpose, but rather in the maxim on which it is done; in the respect for law (as duty requires)<sup>6</sup>.

If via synthetic analysis it was possible to discover a *contradiction in conception* as a proof of the impossibility of universalize hypothetical imperatives, via analytic analysis we can rely on the *contradiction in willing* (and no merely of state of affairs) to determine that no possibility is given, in rational beings, to will the universalization of a maxim applicable in a world of which the agent is going to be part.

Given, then, the definition of good will, and the possibility of laws that determine our conduct, a further step is needed in understanding how exactly we, as rational beings, can conform to any law. Kant proposes two possibilities: the *heteronomous* one, where

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<sup>5</sup> J.W. Ellington, note 4, p.11 *Groundwork*.

<sup>6</sup> 'Respect' as Kant employes it, can be define as follows: [...] even though respect is a feeling [...] is self-produced by means of a rational concept. [...] What I recognize as a law for me, I recognize with respect [...].

it is something outside ourselves that motivates us in following the law (such as God, nature etc... [Groundwork 441] or the *autonomous* one, where our motivation comes only from ourselves. So we can deductively derive from what said so far, that moral motivations must be autonomous and, by being synthetic, it cannot be proved by merely analyzing the concept contained in it<sup>7</sup>.

Such autonomy is the possibility for human beings to self-govern each other, by rationality as a means by which we achieve the ultimate end: a *self-consistency freedom* which needs to be restricted by moral rules so to conduct our actions by prevailing of 'regularity'<sup>8</sup>.

#### **4\_An objection to Kant's moral system.**

A possible way to understand if Kantian system works, and therefore if Kant's claim that ethical imperatives are plausibly categorical or not, is by following Foot's analysis on the categorical imperative. As specified above (chapter 1), all ethical imperatives are categorical. A fundamental question now is, if this implies the fact that the categorical imperatives must then be ethical; for if not, then many doubts arise concerning the value of any supreme principle at all.

Foot defines hypothetical imperatives distinguishable from categorical ones from the usage of *should*; in fact, whenever 'should' doesn't stand "unsupported or in need of support", its use is 'non-hypothetical'. However, as he shows, there are several cases where 'should' statements are of this form but could never be considered categorical, such as 'rules of etiquette'.

It remains then to understand how we can accept to be driven by morality at all, for Foot determines that 'the man who rejects morality because he sees no reason to obey its rules can be convicted of villainy, but not of inconsistency'<sup>9</sup> and for morality cannot be (at least from an autonomous point of view) supported by sentences of the form 'must do' or 'have to do'. the ultimate solution would be, then, that there is a 'background of teaching' that determines the *requirements* (and not simply the recommendation) for the usage of 'should'; and no other 'binding force' should be examined, for the inescapability of morality could only come from the way it is taught and nothing else. Therefore, now, the problem becomes as follows: is there such a principle as the supreme one, or is morality just a matter of *feeling*?

Now, if we at least agree that men are capable of reasoning in choosing to act in such and such way, it is quite plausible that they can do what they do because considered morally right; but this, Foot establishes, doesn't imply any necessity of moral virtue non rejecting the categorical imperative. Indeed what is needed is a reformulation of the end (whether actual or possible) such that even hypothetical imperatives can make a man's action just or right; cases of this sort can be found either in charity or honesty, while some paradigms arise when talking about justice.

In any case, the 'ought' imposed by the kantian view, must be rejected if considered as a sort of binding force of moral behavior. There is not such a supreme principle to which we can all always refer.

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<sup>7</sup> *Groundwork*, [440].

<sup>8</sup> Paul Guyer, *Kant's Groundwork*, 2007

<sup>9</sup> P.Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, p.161