

MORALITY AS CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

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This article attempts to foreground morality as categorical imperative. For Kant the categorical imperative is the fundamental principle of morality grounded on the idea of autonomy. He argues that an exclusive empirical philosophy can have nothing to say about morality, it can only urge us to be guided by our emotions or at the best by an enlightened self-love, at the very time when the abyss between unregulated impulse or undiluted self-interest and moral principles has been so tragically displaced in practice. Kant believed that an action can only be morally worthy if it is performed in accordance with the categorical imperative, meaning that it is performed out of a sense of duty to the moral law. The categorical imperative must be universally applicable to all autonomous beings. And I agree with Kant that a principle which applies to all autonomous beings must be categorical imperative based on universal law. Morality, for Kant is fundamentally a matter of following the categorical imperative and such is a matter of acting from duty and not simply outwardly conforming to a rule because for Kant conformity to the moral duty is the practical necessity of a possible action as necessary of itself without reference to another end.

The categorical imperative is the moral principle formulated by Kant in his book entitled: “*Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*”. He was a philosopher who aimed to establish an absolute system of morality emphasizing on the necessity of basing morality on a priori principles grounded upon reason. Kant believes that our moral duties come immediately from human reason sans any consideration of the tangible effects of our actions and the categorical imperative is a method of directly accessing the commands of our reason. He argues that an exclusive empirical philosophy can have nothing to say about morality, it can only urge us to be guided by our emotions or at the best by an enlightened self-love, at the very time when the abyss between unregulated impulse or undiluted self-interest and moral principles has been so tragically displaced in practice. It should be obvious that from experience of what men in fact do we are unable to prove what they ought to do; for we must admit that they often do what they ought not to do—provided we allow that there is such a thing as a moral ‘ought’ or a moral duty. Hence if there are moral principles in accordance with which we ought to act, knowledge of these principles must be a priori knowledge; it cannot be based on sensuous experience.¹

¹ Kant, I., (1785) *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Moral*, p. 4

Kant diversified two types of imperative, namely, categorical and hypothetical imperative. All imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically. According to Kant imperatives are expressed by ought. Imperative expressed by “ought” in moral sense is categorical and imperative expressed by “ought” in nonmoral sense is hypothetical. All imperatives always express some kinds of practical propositions because they enjoin what ought to or ought not to. An imperative is something that a will ought or shall do because the will is obligated to act in the manner in which it conforms to moral law. The categorical imperative is an obligation by the will to act so that the action can be considered as a universal law. Kant holds that morality is fundamentally a matter of following the categorical imperative and such is a matter of acting from duty and not simply outwardly conforming to a rule.

It is intriguing to delve into how Kant offers justification of the categorical imperative in his book *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. The categorical imperative is extracted from the concepts of goodness, will and obligation. The conception of an objective principle which is obligatory for a will, is called a command, and the formula of the command is called an Imperative. He distinguishes “perfectly rational agents” from “non-perfectly rational agents” and uses the distinction in order to define the term “imperative”. After explicating an imperative, he then proceeds to the possibility of the categorical imperative by way of questioning as to how imperatives are possible. In order to discern this possibility it is important to peruse again the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions; and a priori and a posterior proposition which he had given in the introduction to the first *Critique*. According to Kant, analytic propositions are a priori propositions since they are independent of experience. In an analytic proposition, the predicate merely repeats and does not add any new information to whatever is contained in the subject. As a result it does not pose much problem. However, Kant uses a priori concept in a wider sense. According to him, all analytic propositions are a priori propositions but all a priori propositions are not analytic propositions, for example, synthetic a priori propositions. Propositions or judgments can be either analytic or synthetic. Synthetic a priori expresses a necessary connection between two distinct concepts: synthetic and a priori. In the analytic propositions, the connection of the predicate with the subject is cogitated through identity² because the former merely repeats what is already contained in the subject and the validity of analytic judgment entails that it is necessarily true,

²Kant, I., (2008) *Kant's Critiques*, A&D Publishing, Radford VA 23243-3005, p. 29

for example, “who wills the end, wills the means” is analytic proposition; whereas, in synthetic propositions or judgments, the predicate does not merely repeat but adds new information to the subject. All hypothetical imperatives are analytic practical propositions as they assert analytic means-end relationship. All categorical imperatives are synthetic a priori propositions. They are called synthetic propositions because they assert synthetic means-end relationship. They are called a priori because their validity is independent of experience. Kant introduces two types of end: subjective and objective. The subjective ends are those whose values are conditional and relative. The objective ends are those whose values are unconditional and absolute. An imperative that represents actions as means to the attainment of objective ends is objectively valid for all persons in the same way. The categorical imperatives are such kind of imperatives. Kant states in his first message that “Hypothetical imperatives are no problem because they are analytic judgments a priori of practical reason. But categorical imperatives require a transcendental deduction because they are synthetic judgment a priori of practical reason.”³ Then, in the second message, which is of the same conclusion, Kant states: “Hypothetical imperatives are no problem because we can demonstrate their possibility by appeal to experience. But categorical imperatives require a transcendental deduction because no experience could suffice to demonstrate their possibility.”⁴ The intricacy of finding possibility of categorical imperatives leads to the question: How is a synthetic a priori proposition possible? In the *Groundwork* Kant claims that the categorical imperative is a synthetic a priori proposition but he admits the difficulty of justifying the same. However, he believes that unless we succeed in justifying it morality remains perhaps a mere “phantom of the brain”⁵. Kant claims the fundamental moral truths are synthetic a priori because moral truths are categorical imperative. Kant held that the categorical imperative is not analytic, because although Kant thought the applicability of the categorical imperative to any given individual is deducible from the assumption that the individual is rational, the concept of the categorical imperative is not contained in the concept of a rational being. Kant thought the categorical imperative must be discovered a priori—through reason—because, as a fundamental moral law applying to all rational beings, it cannot be discovered through mere experience: one cannot learn

³Wolff, P. R., (1973) *Autonomy of Reason: A Commentary on Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 143

⁴Ibid.,

⁵ Kant, I., (1964) *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Moral*,

how one should act from how people do act.⁶ The prescriptive content of moral claims coupled with necessity and universality directed Kant to believe we know moral truths only a priori. Kant holds that the law that an autonomous agent pursue to perform a moral action, the maxim the agent acts on must be one that the agent can consistently will to govern everyone, regardless of their goals, as a necessary law. For Kant there is only a single categorical imperative: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”⁷.

Kant says that the principle of morality is a synthetic proposition, namely: “An absolutely good will is one whose maxim can always have as its content itself considered as a universal law”; for we cannot discover this characteristic of its maxim by analyzing the concept of an absolutely good will⁸. It is not worthless to make a brief foray into the analysis of will. Kant introduces two kinds of will: holy will and human will. For Kant, a holy will is absolutely a good will which necessarily accords with the law of autonomy. It is not conditioned by any obligations because “Obligation can have no reference to a holy being” and only god has the holy will. Whereas human wills are conditional and are subject to obligations. There are two types of human will: rational will and irrational will. A rational will is will moved by the idea of good or law. The goodness of moral action consists in the goodness of will.

It will be quite important and intriguing, simultaneously, to unearth Kant’s different formulations in order to grasp better understanding of his ethical theory. In the first formulation of his ethical theory, namely, the Formula of Universal Law, Kant states the first formula in the negative way: “I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.”⁹ In *Groundwork II* he gives the same formula in a positive way: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”¹⁰ Kant also gives a subsidiary formulation of the formula of universal law in terms of the concept of a law of nature. He states: “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law

⁶ *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (2021) by the Metaphysics Research Lab, Department of Philosophy, Stanford University

⁷ Kant, I., (1964) *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Moral*, translated and analyzed, p. 88

⁸ Ibid.,

⁹ Wolff, P.R., (1973) *Autonomy of Reason: A Commentary on Kant’s Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, p. 88

¹⁰ Kant, I., (1964) *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Moral*, translated and analyzed, p. 88

of nature.”¹¹ Kant's first formula of universal law requires an individual to obey a maxim which can, without contradiction, be willed to be a rule for everyone. That is to say in other words, that the essence of morality lies in acting on the basis of an impersonal principle which is valid for everyone, including oneself. Thus, Kant insists that a moral rule be consistently universalized because for him the moral rules command categorically and not hypothetically. The former is a command that is necessarily binding to all rational agents whereas the latter is an imperative that tells us what if we desire a particular result. The moral laws are commands that need no consideration of subjective desire. Take, for example, ‘speaking the truth’. There is no situation where truth speaking is not relevant. This means that the principle of action should be applied consistently. The first formulation is based upon the principle of non-contradiction. Kant believed that the maxim (or principle) upon which one acts should be without contradiction. I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law. In the second formulation Kant explicates in terms of the idea of humanity as an end in itself. It states: “Act only in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same as the end.”¹² This formulation requires that persons should be treated as end themselves and not as means. Actions should not be used as means to subjective ends. And to say this does not mean that the second formulation of the categorical imperative presents actions as end in themselves. It does relate actions to persons and prescribes that they ought to be treated as objective ends. When Kant says that actions ought to be done for the sake of action, it does not mean that persons do not constitute the objects of morality or persons do not figure in the centre of moral consideration. If it were so, he would not have said that persons ought to be treated as end in themselves, which he says. He suggested if there were objective ends given to us by reason, ends which in all circumstances, a fully rational agent would necessarily pursue an absolute and unconditioned value. They would also be ends which an imperfectly rational agent ought to pursue if he were irrational enough to be tempted to do otherwise.¹³ Only rational agents can be ends in themselves according to Kant, because they alone can have an unconditioned and absolute value and therefore, it is wrong to use them simply as means to an end. Kant’s doctrine of end-in-itself follows from the very essence of the categorical

¹¹Ibid., p.89

¹²Ibid., p. 27

¹³Ibid., p. 28

imperative. As rational beings would act inconsistently if they did not treat every human being the way they themselves would want to be treated. If the categorical imperative was the end in mind when actions were performed, then only those who wish to achieve the categorical imperative would be obligated to act morally. Therefore, he argued that the basis of the categorical imperative must be an objective end, which Kant referred to as an “ends in itself”. This formulation requires of us to respect all human beings impartially and avoid exploiting none. The third formulation of the categorical imperative explains in terms of self-legislation or giving oneself rule which he calls the autonomy of will. He states: “So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxim.”¹⁴ To Kant, the formula of autonomy is the most important maxim of morality since it leads straight to the idea of freedom. According to him, freedom constitutes the foundation of morality. The third formulation expresses the idea that it is a rational will which obliges an agent to act from the categorical imperative, rather than any other outside influence. Autonomy of the will for Kant is entirely self-legislating: The moral obligations by which it is perfectly bound are those which it has imposed upon itself while simultaneously regarding them as binding upon everyone else by virtue of their common possession of the same rational faculties. All genuinely moral actions, Kant believes, spring from the freely chosen dictates of an autonomous will. Kant thought that any moral law which was based on fulfilling some other interests would deny the categorical imperative, leading him to argue that moral law must only arise from a rational will. This principle requires us to recognize and respect the right of others to act autonomously as moral laws must be universalizable, what is required of a person is required of all. We are subject to the moral law only because it is the necessary expression of our own nature as rational agents. Moral obligations and moral responsibilities always presuppose freedom of the agent. Rational beings are evaluated in terms of good and bad because they are believed to be having the faculty of reason and thus freedom consists in the exercising of one’s own reason in self-legislating and auctioning accordingly. In the fourth formulation, Kant emphasizes on the concept of Kingdom of ends which he thinks alone can render the kingdom of ends possible. There is another sub-formula of the kingdom of ends which springs directly from the formula of autonomy: “So act as if you were through your maxims a law-making member of a kingdom of end.”¹⁵ The Formulation of the Kingdom of Ends suggests that

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 34

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 35

moral agents should act as if their maxims will set the laws in a 'Kingdom of Ends'. What does Kant mean by the Kingdom of ends"? Kant says "I understand by a 'kingdom' a systematic union of different rational beings under common law". "For rational beings all stand under the law that each of them should treat himself and all others, never merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end in himself. But by so doing there arises a systematic union of rational beings under common objective laws- that is, a kingdom. Since these laws are directed precisely to the relation of such beings to one another as ends and means, this kingdom can be called a Kingdom of ends (which is admittedly only an Ideal)"¹⁶. It is understood from the passages that objective ends differ from that of a kingdom of end. Persons and persons along are objective end. Objective laws are means to the realization of the kingdom of ends since they are directed precisely to the relation of human beings to one another. Hence action performed in accordance with them should be treated as a means and analysis of categorical imperative as prescribing means to objective ends must not be discarded.¹⁷

Kant's categorical imperative cannot be stated as if the theory is devoid of criticisms; there are critical views against his categorical imperative. One such wide-ranging critique comes from Schopenhauer in his book *On the Basis of Morality*¹⁸ where he opens up his view alleging the categorical imperative as not pure as it can only be explained as something which relies on empirical ends and thus believes these empirical ends reduces morality to a species of egoism. Kant was also criticized for failing to embrace the role of compassion in his ethics which he thinks plays an important role in guiding human conduct as human conduct is guided sometimes by compassion for other people and other times by selfish or egoistic concerns for oneself. Schopenhauer's his own moral system is premised on the notion of compassion and hence he argues that moral conduct must be sympathetic. Hegel, on the other hand, criticizes Kant's categorical imperative because he believes that the Formula of the Law of Nature is reduced to empty formalism, and has converted into mere rhetoric about duty for duty's sake." According to Hegel, Kant's categorical imperative does not offer a clear guideline for assessing moral conduct nor does it provide us with any specific

¹⁶ Kant, I., (1972) *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Moral*, translated and analyzed by H.J. Paton, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, pp. 74-75

¹⁷ Jagat Pal (April-June 1986) "Morality as Categorical Imperative", *The North-Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. IV, No. 2, p. 33

¹⁸ Schopenhauer, Arthur (1995) *On the Basis of Morality*, translated by E.F.J. Payne: Berghahn Books, Oxford

moral duties that we can follow. Mill argues that the categorical imperative does not succeed as a purely rational source of obligation. Instead, he says, it is actually a disguised version of the utilitarian principle which is the very last thing that Kant thought his principle was: According to Mill, the categorical imperative fails to reveal any such contradiction, and the only thing it does reveal is that the consequences of universalizing a maxim involve more unhappiness than happiness. Kant may reject a specific notion of sympathy as alleged by Schopenhauer however a generalized notion of sympathy emerges in the Formula of the End in Itself, which foregrounds us to respect the inherent value of all people as ends in themselves and thus his view is not devoid of sympathizing humans race. Kant would probably agree that universalized lying would have bad effects on society but what Kant is saying is that harmful effects do not make actions immoral but it is the intention because there is something inherently wrong with the actions themselves because they conflict with our rational intuitions about moral duty.

Morality, according to Kant does not emanate from conformity to hypothetical imperatives but rather conformity to the Categorical imperative. Kant shows that the form of morality must be deontological, universal, and unconditional and thus argues that the categorical imperative is the only principle that can satisfy the concept of a moral imperative. Morality should provide us with a framework of rational principles that guide and restraint action independent of personal intentions and desires and such principles would ground on a rational will which is regarded as autonomous and this self-legislating autonomous reason offers overriding grounds for viewing each moral person as having equal worth and respect. And I agree with Kant that there is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a good will. And the only motive that can endow an act with moral value, he argues, is one that arises from universal principles discovered by reason and that is, goodwill. For Kant morality is fundamentally a matter of following the categorical imperative and following as such is a matter of acting from duty and not simply outwardly conforming to a rule because conforming to the moral duty is the practical necessity of a possible action as necessary of itself without reference to another end.

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