

KANT



The Categorical Imperative determines the rightness of acts by whether you could consistently let everyone do the same.



Kant's overall argument

- **Kant's argument here runs in reverse of the proof he ultimately wants to give, deriving the Categorical Imperative from its metaphysical foundations.**
- **Instead, he's trying to show how analyzing our common moral ideas generates and explains the Categorical Imperative, by arguing**
 - **(Chapter One) from the notion of *the good will* (as an idea we all have) to universalizability as the criterion of right action**
 - **(Chapter Two) from *universalizability* as the basis of the Categorical Imperative (analyzed and applied to examples) to the idea of autonomy**
 - **[(Chapter Three) from *autonomy* (as a positive notion of free will) to its metaphysical foundations.]**



The [morally] good will

- [vs. the utilitarian starting point of *nonmoral* good]
- involves "summoning all the means in our power, not just good wishes"
- is identified with *practical reason* (= reason leading to action)
- is said to be the only thing that's good without qualification, i.e. unconditionally, or in itself (= no matter what it leads to OR is combined with).
 - vs. talents, intelligence, gifts of fortune, even virtues like self-control (all of which can be misused, if the will isn't good)
 - vs. happiness (which can lead to bad consequences, and in any case seems inappropriate, in someone who lacks good will)
- is good even where it has bad (or no) effects.



Motivation by duty alone

- **Kant gives a number of extreme examples intended to isolate the essential motive of the good will, e.g.:**
 - *someone who hates life but resists the temptation to commit suicide just because it would be wrong*
 - *someone who loses (or never had) sympathy for others but is motivated by duty to alleviate others' suffering*
- **Sometimes Kant suggests that he has no regard for cases that we commonly think of as morally admirable, e.g. aiding others out of “pathological” [= emotional] love or compassion.**
- **His point seems to be that the agents in cases motivated by inclination don't [clearly] deserve *moral* credit – in contrast to someone who resists his inclinations in order to do his duty.**

From good will to right action



- **So the good will is manifested most clearly in cases where duty conflicts with inclination – understood in a very broad sense that includes all (other) motives, even moral emotions such as compassion.**
- **Hence its goodness can't be explained by any "material" end – an object of inclination – but only by something "formal" about its motivating principle, or "maxim."**
- **After all particular ends are subtracted, what motivates the good will can only be respect for law as such, or the form of law, or lawfulness: that the maxim of action is suitable to serve as a universal law.**
- **This requirement of *universalizability* amounts to a single moral principle – meant to identify action *in accordance with* duty, i.e. right (= permissible) action, whether or not it's done *out of* duty, as in Kant's cases of good will. (So the acts of his prudent grocer, e.g., do count as right.)**

Applying universalizability



- **Kant applies his “universal law” criterion to the case of making a false promise to get needed resources.**
 - **The maxim includes the purpose of the act: to get the needed resources.**
 - **If a maxim allowing yourself to lie for that purpose were universalized, however, people would no longer expect promises to be kept, so your word would no longer be trusted and hence would not enable you to get the needed resources.**
 - **Universalizing the maxim would thus be impossible, i.e. self-defeating [vs. likely to have bad consequences].**
 - **So the act described by the maxim is wrong.**
- **An act that *can* be universalized isn’t necessarily required, but just right (= permissible). Kant isn’t saying that everyone *should* act the same way.**

Ch. 2's main points in order



- **Imperatives: hypothetical vs. categorical**
- **More concrete formulation of universalizability = formula of universal law [FUL]**
 - **formula of natural law, applied to examples**
- **Other formulations and corresponding ideals:**
 - **Formula of Humanity (FH), applied to examples**
 - **Formula of Autonomy and self-legislation**
 - **Kingdom of Ends**



Imperatives

- = **commands** expressed by “ought” (or “must”)
- **apply only to beings who can, but don’t necessarily, act on applicable laws or rules of reason.**
- **are *hypothetical* when they presuppose some further end, one that’s either**
 - **variable (e.g., “You ought to take Route 1,” which depends on the assumption that the person addressed wants to get from here to the Beltway), or**
 - **indeterminate (e.g., “You ought to have a wide circle of friends” [to promote happiness, a general end we all share], which might turn out to be untrue for a given individual; only experience can tell**
- **otherwise are *categorical*, and hence apply to all rational beings as such, whatever their ends.**



“The” Categorical Imperative

- **universal law** (pp. 221f.): Act so you can universalize the **maxim of your action**. (Counts, along with the next version, as the *first formulation* of the Categorical Imperative, the “formula of universal law” = FUL.)
- **law of nature** (p. 222): Act as if creating a natural law (= a more concrete version of FUL).
- **humanity as an end** (p. 229): Never treat a person *merely* as a means. (Referred to as the *second formulation*, or the “formula of humanity” = FH. Along with the next two formulations, meant to make the Categorical Imperative less abstract, more intuitively appealing.)
- **autonomy** (p. 231): Think of each rational will as **legislating** (= making law) for itself and all others. (Referred to as the *third formulation*, sometimes in combination with the next version.)
- **kingdom of ends** (pp. 233f.): Imagine you’re a member of a community of rational beings obeying common laws.

Kant's main examples of duties



- **Kant's examples fall into four categories:**
 - **perfect, strict, narrow (nothing left to agent's choice)**
 - **to oneself: ban on suicide**
 - **to others: ban on lying promise**
 - **imperfect, meritorious, wide, lax (leaving room for choice)**
 - **to oneself: cultivating talents**
 - **to others: aiding others in distress**
- **The perfect/imperfect distinction allows Kant to claim that duties never conflict, since we can limit action on an imperfect duty to cases where it doesn't violate a perfect duty.**



Testing rightness

- ***On the first formulation (see pp. 222ff.):***
 1. **Specify the maxim of the action (the motivating principle behind it, e.g. "I shall lie when it's necessary to gain access to essential resources").**
 2. **Try to universalize the maxim ("Everyone may lie when it's necessary...").**
 3. **Ask whether the result of 2 is possible (or possible to will, in the case of imperfect duties; see next slide).**
 4. **If the answer is negative, the act is wrong, i.e. not in accordance with duty, so you ought not to do it. Otherwise, the act is right, i.e. permissible.**

- ***On the later formulations (see pp. 230ff.):***

Skip step 2, and in step 3 ask whether the maxim is consistent with the ideal in question (or promotes it, in the case of imperfect duties).



A less straightforward case

- **Now consider the imperfect duty to aid others in distress (p. 223):**
 - **The maxim here involves not contributing to others' well-being (but not interfering with it, either).**
 - **Kant grants that it would be *possible* to allow everyone to act on that maxim.**
 - **Instead, he says it would be impossible *to will* that everyone may act on the maxim, since he takes a desire for the support of others when in distress to be a necessary element of a rational will.**
- **To apply the second formulation (p. 231), Kant essentially says that acting on the maxim would mean failing to treat persons as ends in a *positive* sense, by promoting their [capacity to pursue] ends.**

Interconnected Kantian ideals



- **Several ideals stressed by contemporary Kantians figure in formulations of the Categorical Imperative:**
 - ***humanity as an end in itself* (i.e., a rational being sets her own ends and is a source of ends for others – something *for the sake of which* we act)**
 - ***respect for persons, dignity of persons* (as having intrinsic worth, in contrast to things, which have worth only as means to our ends, or because we enjoy them)**
 - ***autonomy (vs. heteronomy), self-legislation* (making law for oneself and others, vs. law imposed by some external source)**
 - ***kingdom of ends* (self-legislators organized into a community by a common law)**
- **The ideal of autonomy will be the basis for Kant's metaphysical argument in ch. 3.**

Metaphysical foundations



Kant's idea of autonomy rests on a fundamental distinction between the "phenomenal" and "noumenal" worlds – or aspects of the world, ways of conceiving of objects in the world, etc.

- **Things as they appear to us (*phenomena*, or appearances) can be known, but only on the assumption that they're organized by the law of causality, and hence that determinism is true.**
- **Things in themselves (*noumena*) can't be known but have to be posited as underlying causes.**
 - We need to have certain beliefs about them in order to see ourselves as acting.
 - These include the view of oneself as free.

Sketch of ch. 3's metaphysical argument



Kant argues in ch. 3 that thinking of ourselves as acting freely *entails* following the Categorical Imperative.

- **The will (= practical reason, deliberation leading to action) itself involves a kind of causality: by willing we *make* ourselves act.**
- **But causality entails acting according to law. Since a free will can't be caused to act by ends of the sort that depend on sensation, it would have to be part of the noumenal world, acting on law as such (see pp. 253f.).**
- **To think of our wills as free, then, we have to think of ourselves as autonomous – as making law for ourselves and all rational beings in what we do.**
- **So freedom implies autonomy, which in turn implies obedience to moral law.**