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Imperatives, Categorical and Hypothetical

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Ethicists distinguish between categorical and hypothetical imperatives. Categorical imperatives specify actions we ought to take regardless of whether doing so would enable us to get anything we want. An example of a categorical imperative might be “Keep your promises.” Hypothetical imperatives identify actions we ought to take, but only if we have some particular goal. They are rules such as “If you want to visit Grant’s tomb, then travel to New York.” Many ethicists believe that moral rules are categorical imperatives: they express what we ought to do, regardless of whether doing it would satisfy our desires or promote our happiness. For example, a person ought to keep a promise she has made even if she no longer wants to keep it because doing so would be unpleasant and in no way serve her purposes.

The distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives derives from Immanuel Kant (*see* KANT, IMMANUEL). This entry investigates his rich and challenging discussion of imperatives. It probes various ways he employs the term “categorical imperative” as well as how he distinguishes between hypothetical imperatives of different sorts. The entry also explores Kant’s views on the basis we have for holding that we genuinely ought to accord our actions to what hypothetical and categorical imperatives prescribe. But the entry turns first to the question of just what Kant means by an imperative.

Imperatives

Imperatives are objective rules of practical reason that are “expressed by an *ought*” (1996b: 413), Kant says. They are practical in that they prescribe actions (or omissions). By expressing “an ought” (*see* OUGHT) either explicitly or implicitly (as in “Keep your promises”), they indicate that they apply to “a will that by its subjective constitution is not necessarily determined” by them (Kant, 1996b: 413). Imperatives specify that “to do or to omit something would be good,” to wills, such as those of human beings, that do not necessarily do what is good (413). We can, Kant suggests, conceive of beings, for example, God or angels, whose willing would necessarily accord with objective rules of reason. To such beings imperatives would not apply; for, according to Kant, it makes sense to say that an agent ought to do something only if it is possible for him to refrain from doing it. Since we human beings can as a result, for example, of indulging our desires for immediate pleasures, fail to abide by objective rules of reason, these rules manifest themselves to us as prescriptions regarding what we ought to do.

Kant contrasts imperatives, which are objective rules, with maxims, which are subjective rules. Imperatives are objective in that “if reason completely determined the will” the actions they prescribe “would without fail take place” (Kant 1996a: 20). But in acting on a particular maxim, an agent might not be doing what he would do if reason completely determined his will. According to Kant, if reason completely determined an agent’s will, he would not act contrary to the supreme principle of morality. But an agent would act contrary to this principle by, for example, acting on a maxim of getting money when in financial need by borrowing on the basis of a false promise to repay. According to the usage

prevalent in Kant's writings, the term "imperative" applies only to rules that are indeed such that insofar as an agent was acting rationally, he would act in accordance with them. This view of imperatives contrasts with a common contemporary employment of the term, according to which imperatives are rules that *purport to be*, but might not actually be, such that a failure to abide by them would be irrational.

Varieties of Categorical and Hypothetical Imperatives

Kant, of course, distinguishes between imperatives that command hypothetically, that is, hypothetical imperatives (*see* PRACTICAL CONDITIONALS), and ones that command categorically, that is, categorical imperatives. Hypothetical imperatives express "the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else that one wills (or that it is at least possible for one to will)" (Kant 1996b: 414). One hypothetical imperative, for example, specifies that it is practically necessary to will to multiply 500 by .3, if one wills to find out what makes 30% of 500. (Strictly speaking, the action specified in the imperative would have to be that of multiplying 500 by .3 *or performing some mathematically equivalent operation*; for multiplying 500 by .3 is not *necessary* to achieve the end.) According to the imperative, willing to multiply 500 by .3 is good, but good only as a means to something else, namely to determining the percentage in question.

Kant identifies categorical imperatives with imperatives of morality (1996b: 416). Categorical imperatives, if there are any, specify an action that is "objectively necessary of itself, without reference to another end" (1996b: 414). In other words, they are unconditionally binding and absolutely necessary (1996b:

408). If a rule is a categorical imperative, then we ought to obey it no matter what else we might will and no matter what we might have an inclination to do (1996b: 416). Moreover, a categorical imperative holds without exception. If an action is commanded by one, then we are obligated to perform it, regardless of what any other rule might prescribe (*see* OVERRIDINGNESS, MORAL). The absolute necessity of a categorical imperative is a feature that distinguishes it from a rule of etiquette. If a categorical imperative demands an action (e.g., that one keep a promise to help someone) then one ought, all things considered, to do it, even if that involves violating a rule prescribing that one reply in a timely fashion to an invitation. Finally, categorical imperatives identify actions that, if performed on the basis of the imperatives' commands, are good in themselves, regardless of whether they are effective as means to realizing their intended results (Kant 1996b: 414, 416). If an agent's (in-itself sufficient) incentive for trying her best to save a stranger from choking to death is the idea that performing actions like this is commanded by a categorical imperative, then her doing so is good, regardless of whether she succeeds in saving him (Kerstein 2002: 98-104, 129-130).

Kant suggests at least three different usages of the term "categorical imperative." We have just elucidated a broad sense, according to which a categorical imperative is an absolutely necessary, unconditionally binding practical rule such that conforming to it because the rule commands it is intrinsically good. But at times the term seems to invoke the concept of an imperative that is categorical in this broad sense but that *also* constitutes the supreme norm for the moral assessment of action (the moral law) (Kant 1996b: 421, 425). According to this narrow concept, a categorical imperative would be a rule from which all moral duties are derived. Kant holds that the imperative "Do not lie" constitutes a

categorical imperative in the broad sense, but not in this narrower sense; for not all moral duties (e.g., a duty to promote others' happiness) can be derived from it (see KANTIAN PRACTICAL ETHICS). Finally, sometimes "categorical imperative" simply designates the particular principle that Kant holds to be the supreme principle of morality (moral law) as well as ones he takes to be equivalent (Kant 1996b: 421). In literature written in English "categorical imperative" in this sense is often capitalized, a convention adopted below. In this sense, the Categorical Imperative is "*act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*" (Kant 1996b: 421) (see CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE; UNIVERSALIZABILITY). In Section 2 of the *Groundwork*, Kant tries to show that if there is a categorical imperative in the narrow sense, then it is the Categorical Imperative. In all three senses, categorical imperatives would, according to Kant, be imperatives of morality.

In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant distinguishes between two kinds of hypothetical imperative: technical and assertoric (1996b: 414-415). Technical imperatives or imperatives of skill specify that an action is good for a possible purpose (1996b: 416), for example: "If you will to visit Grant's tomb, then you ought to will to go to New York." (More precisely, the imperative would have to be something like this: "If you will to visit Grant's tomb, the tomb has not been moved from its New York location, you are not already in New York, and going to New York is in your power, then you ought to will to go to New York." But we can ignore such complexities here.) An agent might have the end of visiting Grant's tomb, but then again he might not. Assertorical imperatives specify that an action is good for some purpose everyone has. Kant discusses a single assertorical imperative, namely one that "represents the practical necessity of an action as a

means to the promotion of happiness” (1996b: 415) (*see* HAPPINESS; WELL-BEING). A human agent’s own happiness is, Kant says, a “purpose that can be presupposed surely and a priori . . . because it belongs to his essence” (415-416). A “precept of prudence” or “pragmatic” imperative, to use Kant’s labels (416), would specify to an agent means to his own happiness (*see* PRUDENCE). Kant’s considered view is that there are no such imperatives. In the *Groundwork* he tells us that imperatives express objective commands of reason (1996b: 413), but shortly thereafter he says that rules of prudence cannot express such commands (418; *see also* 1996a: 20-21). There are no imperatives of prudence, Kant implies, because means to the promotion of happiness cannot be prescribed with certainty.

One issue that arises in connection with hypothetical imperatives is that of how to interpret the scope of the “ought” they contain (Greenspan 1975, Schroeder 2005) (*see* IMPERATIVES, LOGIC OF). Consider again the imperative “If you will to visit Grant’s tomb, then you ought to will to go to New York.” According to one reading of this imperative, a narrow scope interpretation, it specifies that everyone who wills to visit Grant’s tomb ought to will to go to New York. Its scope ranges over only those who will to make this visit. According to a second, wide scope reading, the imperative specifies that everyone is such that if he wills to visit Grant’s tomb, then he ought to will to go to New York. Its scope ranges over all of us, that is, agents who are not perfectly rational. On the first reading, the imperative is binding only on those who actually will to visit Grant’s tomb. On the second, it is binding on everyone, although it prescribes a particular action only to those who will to visit Grant’s tomb. The second, wide-scope reading squares better with Kant’s text, in particular with his claim that imperatives are objective and hold for everyone (Kant 1996b: 413-414; Wood 1999: 63-64).

The Possibility of Hypothetical Imperatives

After introducing the notions of hypothetical and categorical imperatives, Kant asks how these imperatives are possible, that is, how “the necessitation of the will, which the imperative expresses” can be understood (1996b: 417). Part of what he seeks seems to be an account of why we should believe them to be binding on our will, that is, such that we genuinely ought to act in accordance with them (see *NORMATIVITY*).

Kant tells us that the possibility of technical imperatives “requires no special discussion” (1996b: 417):

Whoever wills the end also wills (insofar as reason has decisive influence on his actions) the indispensably necessary means to it that are within his power. This proposition is, as regards the volition, analytic; for in the volition of an object as my effect, my causality as acting cause, that is, the use of means, is already thought, and the imperative extracts the concept of actions necessary to this end merely from the concept of a volition of this end . . . (417)

Consider once again a rule that we are assuming to be an imperative “If you will to visit Grant’s tomb, then you ought to will to go to New York.” On the wide scope reading, this imperative says: Everyone (e.g., every human rational agent) is such that if he wills to visit Grant’s tomb, then he ought to will to go to New York. What makes this imperative binding on a human agent’s will? Kant seems to answer this question in two steps, one explicit and the other implicit. First he states that whoever wills an end, also wills, if reason has decisive influence on his action, the indispensably necessary means to it in his power. Kant calls this proposition

analytic. According to him, it belongs to the concept of an agent's being fully rational in his willing that if he wills an end, then he also wills the indispensably necessary means to it in his power. So it belongs to the concept of an agent's being fully rational in his willing that if he wills to visit Grant's tomb, then he wills to go to New York, assuming that doing so is in his power. Second, Kant seems to assume that beings, such as human agents, who are not always fully rational in their willing ought, so far as they can, to be fully rational in their willing. So to the question of why it is the case that we genuinely ought to act in accordance with the imperative Kant implies first that an agent fully rational in his willing would do so and second that we ought, so far as possible, to do what a fully rational agent would do. (For a different view of Kantian grounds for holding hypothetical imperatives to be binding on the will, see Korsgaard 1997.)

Kant does not hold that it belongs to the concept of a human agent's actually willing an end that she also will the necessary means to it that are in her power. If, when a human agent willed an end, she always willed these means, then rules of reason specifying means to ends would not manifest themselves as imperatives to her. The "ought" would be out of place. Kant is committed to the view that a human agent can fail to will means, even ones that are necessary and in her power, to ends that she wills.

But what does it mean, according to Kant, *to will* an end? Since Kant's discussions of willing are dense and sometimes obscure (1996b: 412-413, 1996c: 213), this question is challenging to answer. Yet he appears to hold that willing an end involves believing it possible for one to attain the end, choosing to attain it, and making some effort to do so. If someone does not believe that it is possible for her to realize an end, then, Kant suggests, she might wish for the end, but cannot

will it (1996c: 213). Someone might, for example, wish to run a marathon, but be unable to will to do so because she knows that she has an irreversible heart problem that prevents her from running long distances. In the *Groundwork*, shortly before introducing his notion of imperatives, Kant defines the will as the capacity to *act* on principles (1996b: 412). So willing an end seems to amount to more than choosing or deciding to pursue it. Someone might choose or decide to realize some object, for example, to get away for a weekend at a bed and breakfast, yet change her mind and never actually make any effort to realize this object, for example, never do any planning for the getaway. Willing involves making some effort to realize what one wills. In this sense, it is a kind of acting (*see* ACTION).

We can now see that a person's willing to visit Grant's tomb involves her making some effort to do so. She might, for example, make a note in her calendar to speak with her boss about taking a paid vacation day for the visit. But a person's willing to visit Grant's tomb does not necessarily involve her trying to take indispensably necessary means to doing so that are in her power. Although she realizes that in order to visit the tomb, she would need to go to New York, she might let her fear of the big city get the best of her and fail utterly to take steps to secure transportation there.

Following Thomas Hill, Jr. (1992) philosophers have used the term "the Hypothetical Imperative" to refer to the principle Kant sets forth when he says: "Whoever wills the end also wills (insofar as reason has decisive influence on his actions) the indispensably necessary means to it that are within his power." Kant himself does not use this terminology. In any case, Hill interprets Kant to be embracing here the principle that if one wills an end, then one either ought to will the necessary means within his power, *or give up willing the end*. As Hill points

out, Kant says that “what is necessary to do merely for achieving a discretionary purpose can be regarded as in itself contingent and we can always be released from the precept if we give up the purpose . . .” (1996b: 420). A “discretionary purpose” is an end that one might have, but that one is under no rational necessity to adopt.

The Hypothetical Imperative is a principle of instrumental rationality. But it is arguably not the only one (*see* PRACTICAL REASONING). On its own the Hypothetical Imperative would not rule out willing an end, willing indispensably necessary means it, but failing to will *efficient* means to it that are in one’s power. For example, it would not rule out willing to visit Grant’s tomb, willing to go to New York as a means of doing so, and taking a route to New York that is ten times longer than the shortest available route one is aware of, even though one realizes that taking the longer rather the shorter route does not contribute to any of one’s ends (O’Neill 1989: 91-92).

In any case, Hill’s interpretation allows Kant to avoid an implication that would be unwelcome to him, to say the least, namely that reason demands incompatible actions. Suppose that someone has willed to poison an innocent person to death. There might, of course, be an imperative of skill that prescribes necessary means in the person’s power to that end. In light of Kant’s statement of (what Hill calls) the Hypothetical Imperative, it might *seem* that in Kant’s view the person would be rationally compelled to take these means. After all, he has willed to poison the innocent person to death. But if he did that, he would presumably violate another imperative, namely one expressing the supreme principle of morality. Reason would be in conflict with itself. On Hill’s interpretation, no such conflict ensues. For the Hypothetical Imperative implies not that the potential

murderer is rationally compelled to act in accordance with the imperative specifying means to poisoning the victim to death, but that he is rationally compelled either to do so, or to give up willing this end. To give up willing the end, he need only decide not to have it as his end, something that, in Kant's view, he is always free to do (Kant 1996c: 384-385). Given that (as we are assuming) the supreme principle of morality demands that he discard his end, reason demands that he do so as well.

A potential problem that arises in connection with the Hypothetical Imperative is that it seems in one sense actually to be a categorical imperative. The Hypothetical Imperative commands that if one wills an end, then one ought to will the necessary means to it within his power, or give up willing the end. It is, according to Kant, an objective rule of reason commanding that one do something, regardless of one's inclinations or further ends. So is it not a categorical imperative in the broad sense we mentioned above? Perhaps Kant would answer negatively on the grounds that it fails to meet one of the criteria he suggests for a categorical imperative in this broad sense. A categorical imperative in this sense (e.g., "Do not lie," in Kant's view) must be such that conforming to it because it is an objective rule of reason is (always) good in itself. But conforming to the Hypothetical Imperative because it is such a rule does not have this feature, Kant might claim. In support of this claim, he might appeal to ordinary moral thinking. One can always obey the Hypothetical Imperative by willing the means to one's end, even if one thereby does something that, intuitively speaking, is not good in itself, such as poisoning an innocent person. Of course, even if the Hypothetical Imperative were a categorical imperative in some broad sense, it would not be one in the narrow sense we highlighted: it would not be a rule from which all genuine

moral duties derive. Finally, terminological awkwardness aside, it is not clear that admitting the Hypothetical Imperative to be a categorical imperative in some broad sense would have a serious negative impact on a Kantian view of practical reason. For its “categorical” command (roughly) either to will the means to one’s end or to give up the end would never conflict with what Kant takes to be the supreme law of practical reason, namely the moral law.

The Possibility of the Categorical Imperative

Kant’s discussion regarding how hypothetical imperatives are possible poses interpretative challenges, but not nearly as many as does his response to the question of how the Categorical Imperative is possible. In inquiring into its possibility, one of Kant’s aims is to justify the conclusion that it is valid, that is, that we ought to conform our actions to it (*see* WHY BE MORAL). Kant’s *Groundwork* argument for the validity of the Categorical Imperative, his “deduction” of this imperative, is notoriously difficult to interpret. But the argument involves an attempt to show that we must take our wills to be free, that is, able to bring about effects “independently of alien causes determining” them (1996b: 446, italics removed). For Kant we can have license to believe that the categorical imperative is binding on us only if we take ourselves to be free in this negative sense. But viewing ourselves as free in this sense requires us to take a “standpoint” outside of the world of sense, that is, outside of the realm in which our wills are determined by alien causes, that is, by desires and inclinations. In addition to the world of sense, we must view ourselves as belonging to the “world of understanding,” (1996b: 451) in which we have freedom in a positive sense (autonomy), that is, the capacity to spontaneously set forth a law for our willing

(the Categorical Imperative) and determine whether to conform our actions to it. So, according to Kant, we cannot coherently conclude that the Categorical Imperative is binding on us unless we also distinguish between the world of sense (the realm of desires and inclinations) and the world of understanding (the realm of the “proper self” [1996b: 461]).

Some philosophers are skeptical about whether philosophical arguments like Kant’s give us sufficient reason to believe that the Categorical Imperative or any other practical principle is unconditionally binding and absolutely necessary (i.e., a categorical imperative in a broad sense). They propose that moral imperatives are actually hypothetical (Foot 1972; *see also* Harsanyi 1958). According to this view, a person would not be morally obligated to promote others’ welfare if he did not have their welfare as an end.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, published three years after the *Groundwork*, Kant himself seems to abandon his project of proving the validity of the Categorical Imperative (1996a: 47). But he maintains that we are justified in holding it to be valid. He states that “the moral law is given, as it were, as a fact of pure reason of which we are a priori conscious and which is apodictically certain”; it is “firmly established of itself” (47). Nevertheless, here as well as in the *Groundwork*, Kant holds that we cannot coherently believe the Categorical Imperative to be valid unless we take ourselves to be free a negative sense and also view ourselves as belonging to both the world of sense and the world of understanding (43-44). According to Kant, we are, rationally speaking, committed to the view that the Categorical Imperative is possible only if we view ourselves as free.

Although Kant maintains that we can be certain that we genuinely ought to abide by the Categorical Imperative, he believes that there is one sense in which its possibility must remain unexplained. It is beyond our capacities to determine how our setting forth the moral law (an objective law of reason) can give us sufficient motive to abide by it, even when satisfying our inclinations would entail violating it (*see* REASONS: MOTIVATING AND NORMATIVE). It is, Kant says, impossible for us to explain “how pure reason can be practical” (1996b: 461, italics omitted).

Cross References:

Action

Categorical Imperative

Happiness

Imperatives, Logic of

Kantian Practical Ethics

Kant, Immanuel

Normativity

Ought

Overridingness, Moral

Practical Reasoning

Practical Conditionals

Prudence

Reasons, Motivating and Normative

Universalizability

Well-being

Why be moral

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