

Phil 104, February 6, 2007
Kant: The Categorical Imperative

Section II: Preliminaries

The “common idea of duty,” Kant thinks, shows that the concept of duty is not based on experience. It is not empirical, but a priori.

- What is given in experience:
 - (i) observations of human nature,
 - (ii) examples of good people, and
 - (iii) incentives.
- Duty has to do with what *ought* to happen, not with what *actually happened*.
- It is part of the common idea that moral laws hold for *all possible rational* beings.

Reason=the faculty of applying a priori concepts,

- either to what is given in experience,
- or independently of what is given in experience. This is *pure* reason.
- *Theoretical* reason applies a priori concepts in pursuit of *knowledge*
- *Practical* reason applies a priori concepts in *action*

Willing=acting by applying the concept of a law.

- The concept of a law is a priori.
- The will=practical reason.

Section II: The supreme principle of morality is the (only) categorical imperative

Imperatives=commands of reason

Hypothetical: If I will end E, then I ought to will the means to E.

- This is *a priori*.
- And it is *analytic*. A judgment is analytic when the predicate is contained in the concept of the subject. (E.g., “All bodies take up space.”) It is contained in the concept of willing something that one wills the means to it.

Categorical: *No matter what else* I will, I ought to will E.

- Only it *really* deserves to be called a law.
- This is a priori, but *not* analytic.
- The supreme principle of morality is *a* categorical imperative. Why?

The idea of a categorical imperative gives us another argument for the formula of universal law:

But when I think of a categorical imperative I know at once what it contains. For, since the imperative contains, beyond the law, only the necessity that the maxim be in conformity with this law, while the law contains no condition to which it would be limited, nothing is left with which the maxim of action is to conform but the universality of a law as such; and this conformity alone is what the imperative properly represents as necessary.

There is, therefore, only a single categorical imperative and it is this: *act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*” (421).

1. Ends or purposes are supplied only by one’s inclinations or willings.
2. A categorical imperative, by definition, is independent of one’s inclinations or willings.

3. Therefore, a categorical imperative cannot get its content from any end or purpose of maxims.
4. Therefore, a categorical imperative must get its content from the form of maxims alone.
5. Therefore, there is only a single categorical imperative: act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.
6. The supreme principle of morality is independent of one's inclinations or willings.
7. Therefore, the supreme principle of morality is a categorical imperative.
8. Therefore, the supreme principle of morality is: act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.

Problem: Why accept 1?

This is the formula of universal law. Kant then suggests that it can also be expressed in the formula of the law of nature: “act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a **universal law of nature.**”

Section II: Applying the formula of universal law

1. I start with a maxim: I will do X as a means to E.
2. If this maxim were a universal law of nature, then it would be the case that: Everyone does X as a means to E.
3. Can I *rationally*, or *without contradiction*, (i) will the maxim and at the same time (ii) will that it becomes a universal law of nature?

Two problems may arise:

Contradiction in conception: I cannot even *think* of the maxim as a universal law of nature without contradiction. (A contradiction like thinking that two is greater than one and thinking that two is less than one.)

Contradiction in the will: I can think of the maxim as a universal law of nature without contradiction, but I cannot *will* the maxim and *will* its becoming a universal law of nature without contradiction. (A contradiction like intending to go home and intending to stay at work.)

A contradiction in *conception* reveals that a maxim would violate a *narrow* and *perfect* duty.
A contradiction in *the will* reveals that a maxim would violate a *wide* (?) and *imperfect* duty.

Narrow: Just the overt action.

Wide: A maxim.

Perfect: require specific acts, little discretion about how they are fulfilled.

Imperfect: require general kinds of conduct, with greater discretion about how they are fulfilled.

Kant's examples:

	Duty to self	Duty to others
Perfect and narrow (contradiction in conception)	1. To preserve oneself	2. Not to make lying promises
Imperfect and wide (?) (contradiction in the will)	3. To develop one's talents	4. To aid others in need

How the lying promise case works:

1. The maxim: "When I believe myself to be in need to money I shall borrow money and promise to repay it, even though I know that this will never happen."
2. As a universal law: "Everyone, when he believes himself to be in need, could promise whatever he pleases with the intention of not keeping it."
3. The very idea of such a universal law is contradictory, or incoherent. Why: "the promise and the end one might have in it" would be "impossible, since no one would believe what was promised him but would laugh at all such expressions as vain pretenses."

Problem: Why exactly would this be contradictory?

How the aid case works:

1. The maxim: "let each be as happy as heaven wills or as he can make himself; I shall take nothing from him nor even envy him; only I do not care to contribute anything to his welfare or to his assistance in need!"
2. As a universal law: No one ever helps others in need.
3. The *thought* of such a universal law is *not* incoherent. There could be such a world.
4. But it is incoherent to *will* that this be a universal law. "For, a will that decided this would conflict with itself, since many cases could occur in which one would need the love and sympathy of others and in which, by such a law of nature arisen from his own will, he would rob himself off all hope of the assistance he wishes for himself."

Problem: What if he does *not will* that his future needs be met?