[47] DUTY AND THE GOOD WILL

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) wrote prolifically on a wide range of subjects, most famously on epistemology and the limits of human reason in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). But he is also well known for his moral philosophy, and here he wants to explain the feeling that many of us have that certain actions are required or prohibited of us *absolutely*, unconditionally, without exception. For instance, many people feel that they are absolutely prohibited from torturing or killing innocent human beings *no matter what*, even if the whole world depended upon it.

Now, what could be the source of such an unyielding sense of obligation? It does not appear to be our desire for some consequence of our action or omission, for we find the action or omission to be right or wrong *in itself*, independent of the consequences. I simply see that it is wrong to take innocent life, and I avoid it not because I fear going to jail, nor because I fear public criticism, nor because I am merely disinclined to kill the innocent, but because it is morally wrong.

One might think this obligation is nothing more than a strong, emotion-laden inclination resulting from previous conditioning and perhaps our biological nature. But Kant suggests it has instead to do with the nature of reason itself, that reason is the source of this obligation and feeling of duty.

Kant discovers in our reason a moral principle called the Categorical Imperative, which he uses to discover more specific, lower-level moral laws or duties (also called “categorical imperatives” or “moral imperatives” or “imperatives of duty”), and it becomes our self-imposed duty to follow these moral laws. Kant also discovered a logical difference between two different kinds of duties — what he calls perfect and imperfect duties — and this difference is also of moral and social importance, for perfect duties appear to be the necessary conditions for human existence within any society, while imperfect duties are the necessary conditions for human existence within any society that is worth having (or “is desirable”).

INTENTIONS, NOT CONSEQUENCES

Kant’s ethics emphasizes the motives and intentions of a person’s actions rather than the consequences, and the will that chooses to follow one motive rather than another. This will, for Kant, is the capacity found in human beings for acting from a principle. As Kant writes:

> Everything in nature works according to law. Only a rational being has the capacity of acting according to the conception of laws, that is, according to principles. This capacity is will. [Ak. 4: 412]

Insofar as the human being guides her actions according to some maxim or principle, rather than according to some whim or inclination — in other words, when an action is motivated by some principle — then the human being is acting as a *person*, possessing dignity and worth that goes far beyond that of a mere biological creature. Only human beings are capable of moral good because only they have *reason* (the ability to conceive of alternative possibil-
ities) and freedom (the ability to choose and act on these possibilities); but unless they use this reason and freedom, these human beings are not living up to their calling as persons, and are not much better off than cattle. Kant characterizes this point quite nicely in a passage from his *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797):

In the system of nature, a human being is a being of slight importance and shares with the rest of animals, as offspring of the earth, an ordinary value. Although a human being has, in his understanding, something more than they and can set himself ends, even this gives him only an *extrinsic* value for his usefulness; that is to say, it gives one man a higher value than another, that is, a *price* as of a commodity in exchange with these animals as things…. 

But a human being regarded as a *person*, that is, as the subject of a morally practical reason, is exalted above any price; for as a person he is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of others or even to his own ends, but as an end in itself, that is, he possesses a dignity (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world. [Ak. 6: 434-5, Gregor translation (Latin phrases omitted)]

What confers worth upon us is the exercising of our wills, our acting according to some maxim or principle. This elevates us above the cattle that chew their cud as a matter of mere inclination. Furthermore, when our action is based on the *right* maxim or principle, then the *will is morally good*. To act from inclination, on the other hand, is not to act with one’s will at all — here the will is simply idling. This concept of the will is central to Kant’s theory.

**What is the Source of Value?**

As Aristotle noted over two thousand years ago in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, a *good* is anything that we value, and there are many goods and several ways that we value these goods. Some goods are valued only as a *means* to some other good: the former we call *instrumental goods*, the latter *final goods*. For instance, many view physical exercise as merely an instrumental good: something you do willingly, but only because it is leads to physical health, which is a *final good* (something valued for its own sake). There are many final goods, such as health, honor, and education, but these also value instrumentally, because they serve as a means to happiness, which appears to be the highest of our final goods, since it is something always desired for its own sake, and never for the sake of something else. Happiness is thus considered the ultimate reason for all human action — Aristotle, Kant, Mill, and pretty much everyone else all agree on this.

Final and instrumental value both concern the *way* that we value something. Having decided this, however, we might still ask about the *source* of the value. Whatever is the source of value we call *intrinsically* valuable, while everything else of value will be valuable only so far as it is related to the source of value in the right way (and so is valuable only *extrinsically*). For Kant, the good will is the source of value, and happiness has value only if it is associated with the good will. Similarly, anything that a good will desires will be thought to have value simply because the good will desires it.

Mill and other utilitarians view happiness as the source of value, as well as having final value. Kant realized that all human beings desire happiness, and that we desire it for itself; but Kant also believed that happiness, apart from a good will, was without moral value. If happiness were the source of value, then it wouldn’t matter how we obtained it, but as the common saying goes, “the end does not justify the means,” or at least not always, and some instances of happiness strike nearly everyone as not merely void of value, but positively bad. Imagine, for instance, some happy, wealthy fellow who amassed his fortunes by exploiting children in slavery-like conditions in his sweatshop. Kant claims that such happiness will always strike an impartial observer as being without value.

Kant begins section one of the *Foundations* with his memorable claim that “nothing in the world … can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a good will.” The good will has *intrinsic value* (“has absolute value,” “is good in itself”), and all other value is derived from this source, and so is *extrinsic*. *Happiness* cannot have intrinsic value, for while we are all naturally inclined to seek happiness, Kant notes that we
do not consider as good those who enjoy happiness at the expense of others.¹ Kant’s main concern is not with “what makes me happy” but rather with “what makes me worthy of happiness” — and having a good will seems necessary for a person to be considered worthy of happiness. For John Stuart Mill, happiness is the source of value, the end-in-itself. For Kant, persons are the source of value. A corollary of this: for Mill, we might sacrifice people so as to maximize happiness; for Kant, we would instead sacrifice happiness for the sake of persons.

**Motivations for Acting: Inclination and Duty**

According to Kant, an action can be motivated in either of two ways: inclination (which includes our sensuous or animal desires) and duty (the voice of reason). An inclination can be either where we desire some consequence of the action (Kant calls these non-immediate inclinations), or where we desire the action itself (Kant calls these immediate inclinations). When an action is motivated by duty, however, the agent will perform the action even if the consequences are not desired and the action itself is repugnant. The “call of duty” is the feeling that you must act not because of some desired or feared consequence, nor because you want to so act, but because it is right and you must do it. Even if the world were to be destroyed tomorrow, you would feel obliged to honor this duty. The most compelling examples are of duties not to act in certain ways, such as the duty not to torture children — recall Alyosha Karamazov, who would not torture a child even if it were to bring about universal happiness for the rest of humanity.

This notion of duty is built into the word ‘deontological’, the stem of which comes from the Greek ‘deon’ [= that which is binding or needful] or ‘dein’ [= to bind]. Similarly, ‘obligation’ comes from the Latin ‘ob’ [= in the way of; towards or against] and ‘ligare’ [= to bind]. We speak of being “duty bound,” for instance. Duty and obligation are closely related concepts, and are central in Kant’s deontological ethics.

**The Good Will is a Will Acting from Duty**

To have a good will means that one acts from duty. Reason, which is the same for everyone, determines those actions we have a duty to perform; if we then choose those actions because we see that they are our duty, then we are acting from a good will. Our will is considered good simply because of its motivations; the consequences of our actions are irrelevant to the will’s value. To say that the good will has intrinsic value is to say that it is good in itself, independent of all else and any possible consequences its actions might have — its value does not depend on it being a means to another good, such as happiness. The utilitarian judges the rightness of actions solely on the basis of their consequences, and often the motive for acting will be a desire for those consequences. This is morally backwards, for Kant, who believes that the action will have moral value only if it was motivated by duty.

**Actions in Conformity with Duty and Actions Motivated by Duty**

Kant offers five illustrations of this three-fold distinction of motive (non-immediate inclination, immediate inclination, and duty): (1) the honest grocer, (2) preserving one’s life, (3) helping others where one can, (4) assuring one’s own happiness, (5) loving neighbors and enemies.

Let’s consider the honest grocer example. Imagine a grocer who treats all of his customers fairly and does not take advantage of those he could, such as young children or the feeble-minded. Clearly such honesty is in conformity with the grocer’s duty (we’ll investigate why it is later). But the motivation behind such action might not be duty itself, but instead some inclination. Suppose the grocer’s honesty is motivated by a desire for its good consequences (such as continued patronage of his store). To do something out of a desire for the consequences is to act from a non-immediate inclination. Here the grocer is being honest not because he sees that it is his duty, but because he desires the rewards of honesty (or fears the penalties of dishonesty).

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¹ It is hard not to think here of that often-quoted passage from the Christian scriptures, I Corinthians 13, where the author writes: “If I have all the eloquence of men or of angels, but speak without love, I am simply a gong booming or a cymbal clashing...(etc).” Here love (Greek: *agape*) is seen in a way analogous to Kant’s good will.
Other actions conform to duty, but are done from some “immediate” inclination, such as where the grocer has a natural affection for his customers. Suppose he has an agreeable nature that rejoices in helping others, and that cheating a customer would be the farthest thing from his mind. Here the honest behavior is itself desired. Whenever an action (or omission) is motivated by a desire or abhorrence of the action itself (as opposed to any consequences of the action), then the action is motivated by an “immediate inclination.”

Finally, some actions both conform to duty and are motivated by duty. If the grocer’s honesty is motivated by the realization that honest behavior is his duty, then his action now has moral value. The good will is the source of value, and it is defined as a will that acts from duty; so only such actions have any value.

**[48] DUTY AND IMPERATIVES**

Kant defines a good will as one that is motivated by duty; but how do we decide what our duty is? Here Kant points us to those imperatives that bind us categorically or absolutely, and Kant argues that these imperatives bind us categorically because of their logical form and because we value humanity intrinsically (as potentially expressing a good will). So we will first consider what categorical imperatives are, and then examine their logical form (as displayed in the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative) and how they are related to humanity as the source of value (in the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative).

**HYPOTHETICAL AND CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVES**

An imperative is simply a command, and Kant distinguishes between two general kinds: hypothetical (of which there are imperatives of skill and imperatives of prudence) and categorical. Only the latter are absolutely binding. Hypothetical imperatives all have the logical form: “If you want E, then do A!”, where E is some particular end or goal, and A is some action: with imperatives of skill, the thing wanted might be any goal at all, while an imperative of prudence always posits happiness as the goal—a goal apparently shared by all humans. Categorical imperatives, on the other hand, simply have the form: “Do A!”

Kant wants to explain and account for our “sense of duty,” which is similar to the voice of conscience commanding us to do (or not do) something. What is the nature of this command? Is it hypothetical? Seemingly not, since it binds us absolutely. Hypothetical imperatives bind us insofar as we desire the end of the action, while categorical imperatives bind us without regard to the consequences.

Most of the imperatives that we hear in life are hypothetical, although they are often uttered as if they were categorical (that is to say, their true logical form is hypothetical, although their surface or apparent form is categorical). For instance, a mother might command her child: “Eat your peas!” It looks as though the mother is issuing a categorical command, and yet no one would mistake this as a moral utterance; it would be a strange world in which children had a moral duty to eat their peas. Rather, the true form of her command is hypothetical, and she has simply left off the antecedent part: she’s really saying something like this: “If you want to have any dessert, then eat your peas!” or “If you want to leave the table, then eat your peas!” or “If you want to be healthy, then eat your peas!” and so on.

Hypothetical imperatives are not absolutely binding because they always assume some desired end, and so the command can be avoided simply by rejecting that end. The child can always reply to her mother: “I don’t need to eat those peas because I don’t care for any dessert” (or “… because I don’t care if you beat me” or “… because I don’t care about my physical health”). The example of the peas is an imperative of skill: these always refer to an end that you might possibly want, and thus are commanded to act in a way that will not foreclose your ability to obtain that end. But because the end is always contingent, the command is contingent as well.

Categorical imperatives are imperatives of morality and have the form: “Do A.” An action is required in and of itself, regardless of any possible ends. It is this species of command that Kant is trying to identify and explain with his moral theory.
**Duty and Imperatives**

**Morality and Religion**

Many people base – or at least believe that they base – their moral views upon their religious views. A typical notion is that we are to act morally because of what might happen after we die: if we act immorally (i.e., if we sin) then we will roast in hell eternally; if we act morally (i.e., do God’s bidding) we will gain entrance to heaven and its eternal rewards. But to base morality on religion like this is to make the commands of morality all hypothetical, having the general form: “If you want to get to heaven (or avoid hell), then do A!” This turns morality into little more than a kind of prudential reasoning, and because Kant believes that all true moral claims are categorical, he rejects this sort of religious foundation. Nor does his rejection seem entirely implausible. After all, how many of us refrain from murdering others, or torturing children, or littering, simply because we fear that not doing so might jeopardize our afterlife? Don’t we believe that it’s wrong to torture children regardless of the consequences?

**The Basis of Moral Obligation**

To what extent do these hypothetical and categorical imperatives bind us, that is, oblige us? Imperatives of skill have little binding power since we need merely say that we don’t desire the end. Imperatives of prudence would appear to be more binding, since everyone desires happiness; but the path to happiness may be different for people, and so the imperative may simply be wrong. Imperatives of morality, on the other hand, bind us completely – and this accords well with how we feel about duty.

Similarly, why hypothetical imperatives bind us is transparently clear: insofar as we desire the end, then we are bound to perform the necessary means. Thus imperatives of skill are tautologically true: you want whatever means are necessary to some desired end. Imperatives of prudence are also tautological, as long as you really know what means are necessary for happiness – but generally these are more like counsels than commands: “doing X will tend towards happiness.” Both of these imperatives are based on some desire: if you desire something, then you must do whatever is necessary to obtain it, and the obligatory force of the imperative depends on that action being a necessary means to the satisfaction of the desire.

Imperatives of morality are not based on the desire for some end, and the ultimate source of their hold upon us is that they arise from the reason within each one of us. Reason discovers moral laws within itself just as it discovers physical laws within the world, and so it is to these that we must now turn.

**Respect for the Law**

To act from duty means to act out of respect for the moral law. Here the “moral law” is seen as analogous to a “physical law”: it is a rule of action that all humans are to follow. These rules are called categorical imperatives, or imperatives of morality or duty, and they are generated by what Kant calls the Categorical Imperative, which reads (in its first formulation):

> “Act only on that maxim that I can consistently will to become a universal law”

This is a rule for telling us how to make rules of action (a rule for rule making). At its heart is the prohibition against making a moral exception of oneself (there is to be “no double-standard” – one for me and another for everyone else). To understand this criterion we need to understand its parts, namely, what maxims and universal laws are, and what is involved in “consistently willing” something.

A maxim is a subjective action-guide, a principle for guiding my actions in particular situations. For example:

- “I shall treat other humans as mere means to my own happiness.”
- “I shall lie whenever it is convenient to me.”
- “I shall help others when I can without serious risk to myself.”
- “I shall steal any library books that I really need.”

A universal law, on the other hand, is an objective action-guide, that is, a principle for guiding everyone’s actions. For example:

> “Everyone shall treat other humans as mere means to their own happiness.”
“Everyone shall lie whenever it is convenient to them.”
“Everyone shall help others if it involves no serious risk to themselves.”
“Everyone shall steal any library books that they really need.”

It turns out that there are two applicable senses of “willing consistently” that a maxim be made into a universal law, and these two senses distinguish what Kant calls perfect and imperfect duties. With perfect (or “strict”) duties, the opposite maxim is logically impossible (i.e., self-contradictory) when universalized (see the second example, below). With imperfect (or “meritorious”) duties, the opposite maxim can be universalized, but I cannot want to universalize it (see the fourth example, below). In other words, some maxims—when universalized—result in a law that becomes self-defeating (these are logically inconsistent, and the opposite maxim is for us a perfect duty). Other maxims can be universalized, but result in a situation that we do not really want (thus result in a contradiction in our will, showing that the opposite maxim is for us an imperfect duty).

If it was from duty that I did not steal the book, then what motivated my honesty in the matter was my recognition that the maxim governing such an action could not be consistently willed to be a law (a rule governing everyone’s actions, including my own).

KANT’S EXAMPLES OF PERFECT AND IMPERFECT DUTIES

Because there are duties to oneself as well as duties to others, and because there are perfect as well as imperfect duties, Kant offers us four sample duties: a perfect duty to the self, a perfect duty to others, an imperfect duty to the self, and an imperfect duty to others. There are, of course, many other duties that fall into these four categories.

(1) Perfect duty to self: “From self-love end your life if it minimizes pain”

Kant believes that I have a perfect duty not to commit suicide, because I cannot universalize the opposite maxim. This “law” of ending one’s life out of self-love is inconsistent with itself; it cannot be universalized because the same principle of behavior (self-love) cannot, in a rational system, lead to diametrically opposed behaviors (viz., the furtherance of one’s life and the destruction of one’s life). This makes sense primarily when the moral world is considered as analogous with the physical world, where the same natural law cannot issue in opposite behaviors. Think of moral laws as natural human instincts: Here we have an instinct for survival (“self-love”), and it would be contradictory that this same instinct also desire its opposite. This does not, however, prohibit all suicide (such as killing oneself to help another: the morality of this would require further inquiry); it only prohibits suicide motivated by self-love.

(2) Perfect duty to others: “Make false promises when convenient”

I have a perfect duty not to make false promises, because I cannot universalize the opposite maxim. Universalization is not possible because it is logically inconsistent with the very institution of promise-making.

Kant is not saying here that I must not give false promises because eventually the institution of promise-keeping would be undermined, and that I do not want such an institution (this would result in a merely prudential, or hypothetical imperative). Rather, the universalization of the maxim results immediately in a logical contradiction.

(3) Imperfect duty to self: “Let your talents rust if you are content”

I have an imperfect duty to develop my talents, because I cannot will to universalize the opposite maxim. This law is inconsistent with my will. We can universalize this maxim (making idleness even an instinct in us), but we cannot will that it be so universalized, for our ends are often changing, and we always desire the means necessary to attain the end. In the future, my ends may be such that I will have required the cultivation of those very talents that I am now neglecting. So there is a contradiction in my will: I will that I do not cultivate my talents and I will that I do cultivate my talents (in order to attain possible future ends).

(4) Imperfect duty to others: “Let all people fend for themselves”

I have an imperfect duty to help others in need, because I cannot will to universalize the opposite maxim. This cannot be universalized because no matter how well off I may be now, there is always the possibility that I will
some day be in need of help. Because I will then desire the aid of others, I cannot also desire that no one ever give aid. This would involve a contradiction in my will.

THREE FORMULATIONS – ONE IMPERATIVE

This one Categorical Imperative is meant as a principle or formula from which is to be derived all the commands of morality (the laws that practical reason gives for guiding our actions). So it is really a second-order rule of action, from which we derive our first-order rules (e.g., of promise keeping, or of benevolence). Kant also gives us three separate formulations of this imperative – the Universal Law, the End-in-Itself, and the Autonomy formulations – noting that these are three ways of thinking about the same thing, and not different moral principles.

The Universal Law formulation (“Act only on that maxim which you can consistently will to be a universal law” [Ak. 4: 421]) was discussed above with Kant’s four examples and the discussion of perfect and imperfect duties.

The End-in-Itself formulation (“Act so as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always as an end, never merely as a means” [Ak. 4: 429]) focuses on the nature of human beings, insofar as they act according to maxims (“have wills”) and so are persons. According to this formulation, I am not to use another in any way with which the other cannot in principle agree, since doing so would be to use that person merely as a means, as a mere tool or instrument of my own plans and desires. This forbids the use of deception or coercion, since either of these involve the other person in a scheme of action to which they would not consent if they knew all the details (were not deceived) or if they were not forced. For instance, to make a lying promise to another so as to procure a loan is to use the person lied to as a mere means. One might as well hit him over the head and steal the money outright – the difference here between force and fraud is morally negligible.

Also, we act for various ends, most of which are relative, and so differ from person to person. But is there an end of absolute value? If so, it is an end common to all humans and so can be the basis of a common principle of action. Well, one end we all share is happiness – even Kant believes this (since happiness is a final good). But happiness doesn’t exist in itself; it can occur only in humans, so we are to promote one another’s happiness, which means we must promote one another’s ends, since having one’s ends promoted results in happiness. Perfect duties require that we not treat a person as a mere means. Imperfect duties require that we promote the interests of others (we view another as an end in itself, and therefore wish also to promote its interests).

The Autonomy formulation (“Act so that the will may regard itself as in its maxims laying down universal laws” [Ak. 4: 431]) instructs us to act as autonomous agents legislating for all agents in what Kant calls “the kingdom of ends.” Everyone is legislating for themselves, and at the same time for everyone else, in that we are all using the same basic formula for deciding which of our maxims are moral, and which not.

READING

FOUNDATIONS OF THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS

(SELECTION)

Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was born, raised, lived, and died in Königsberg (East Prussia, later named Kaliningrad as part of the former USSR). Kant was the first modern philosopher to teach philosophy in a university — and after Plato, Aristotle, and maybe Descartes, he has done the most to alter the way that philosophers pursue their discipline. He was “awakened from his dogmatic slumbers” rather late in life by read-
Reading: Kant, Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals

ing David Hume, and went on to write one of the greatest (and most difficult) books in the history of philosophy: The Critique of Pure Reason (1781; 2nd ed.: 1787). While at first widely misunderstood, this book went on to change the way that we think of ourselves and the physical universe.

As a young professor, Kant was quite the socialite, always in high demand at parties and other gatherings. In his later years, however, his life became more regular, and legend claims the neighbor women would set their clocks by his afternoon walks, which he began promptly at 3:30 (the path that he took came to be called “The Philosopher’s Walk”). Only once did Kant fail in this routine: Having recently received Rousseau’s new book Émile, he was unable to tear himself away from it.

The following reading is from sections one and two of Kant’s Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals (published in 1785), in which Kant formulated for the first time the general outlines of his new moral theory.

[THE GOOD WILL]

Nothing in the world — indeed nothing even beyond the world — can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a good will. Intelligence, wit, judgment, and the other talents of the mind, however they may be named, or courage, resoluteness, and perseverance as qualities of temperament, are doubtless in many respects good and desirable. But they can become extremely bad and harmful if the will, which is to make use of these gifts of nature and which in its special constitution is called character, is not good. It is the same with the gifts of fortune. Power, riches, honor, even health, general well-being, and the contentment with one’s condition which is called happiness, make for pride and even arrogance if there is not a good will to correct their influence on the mind and on its principles of action so as to make it universally conformable to its end. It need hardly be mentioned that the sight of a being adorned with no feature of a pure and good will, yet enjoying uninterrupted prosperity, can never give pleasure to a rational impartial observer. Thus the good will seems to constitute the indispens-able condition even of worthiness to be happy.

[...]

The good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes or because of its adequacy to achieve some proposed end; it is good only because of its willing, i.e., it is good of itself. And, regarded for itself, it is to be esteemed incomparably higher than anything which could be brought about by it in favor of any inclination or even of the sum total of all inclinations. Even if it should happen that, by a particularly unfortunate fate or by the niggardly provision of a stepmotherly nature, this will should be wholly lacking in power to accomplish its purpose, and if even the greatest effort should not avail it to achieve anything of its end, and if there remained only the good will (not as a mere wish but as the summoning of all the means in our power), it would sparkle like a jewel in its own right, as something that had its full worth in itself. Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither diminish nor augment this worth. [...]
one, so that a child may buy of him as cheaply as any other. Thus the customer is honestly served. But this is far from sufficient to justify the belief that the merchant has behaved in this way from duty and principles of honesty. His own advantage required this behavior; but it cannot be assumed that over and above that he had a direct inclination to the purchaser and that, out of love, as it were, he gave none an advantage in price over another. Therefore the action was done neither from duty nor from direct inclination but only for a selfish purpose. […]

[THE WILL AND THE LAW]

Everything in nature works according to laws. Only a rational being has the capacity of acting according to the conception of laws, i.e., according to principles. This capacity is will. Since reason is required for the derivation of actions from laws, will is nothing else than practical reason. If reason infallibly determines the will, the actions which such a being recognizes as objectively necessary are also subjectively necessary. That is, the will is a faculty of choosing only that which reason, independently of inclination, recognizes as practically necessary, i.e., as good. […]

[CLASSIFICATION OF IMPERATIVES]

The conception of an objective principle, so far as it constrains a will, is a command (of reason), and the formula of this command is called an imperative.

All imperatives are expressed by an “ought” and thereby indicate the relation of an objective law of reason to a will which is not in its subjective constitution necessarily determined by this law. This relation is that of constraint. Imperatives say that it would be good to do or to refrain from doing something, but they say it to a will which does not always do something simply because it is presented as a good thing to do. Practical good is what determines the will by means of the conception of reason and hence not by subjective causes but, rather, objectively, i.e., on grounds which are valid for every rational being as such. It is distinguished from the pleasant as that which has an influence on the will only by means of a sensation from merely subjective causes, which hold only for the senses of this or that person and not as a principle of reason which holds for everyone.

 […]

All imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically. The former present the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else which one desires (or which one may possibly desire). The categorical imperative would be one which presented an action as of itself objectively necessary, without regard to any other end.

Since every practical law presents a possible action as good and thus as necessary for a subject practically determinable by reason, all imperatives are formulas of the determination of action which is necessary by the principle of a will which is in any way good. If the action is good only as a means to something else, the imperative is hypothetical; but if it is thought of as good in itself, and hence as necessary in a will which of itself conforms to reason as the principle of this will, the imperative is categorical. […]

[THE UNIVERSAL LAW FORMULA]

[…] There is, therefore, only one categorical imperative. It is: Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. […]

[ILLUSTRATIONS]

We shall now enumerate some duties, adopting the usual division of them into duties to ourselves and to others and into perfect and imperfect duties.

1. A man who is reduced to despair by a series of evils feels a weariness with life but is still in possession of his reason sufficiently to ask whether it would not be contrary to his duty to himself to take his own life. Now he asks whether the maxim of his action could become a universal law of nature. His maxim, however, is: For love of myself, I make it my principle to shorten my life when by a longer duration it threatens more evil than satisfaction. But it is questionable whether this principle of self-love could become a universal law of nature. One immediately sees a contradiction in a system of nature whose law would be to destroy life by the feeling whose special office is to impel the improvement of life. In this case it would not exist as nature; hence that maxim cannot obtain as a law of nature, and thus it wholly contradicts the supreme principle of all duty.
2. Another man finds himself forced by need to borrow money. He well knows that he will not be able to repay it, but he also sees that nothing will be loaned him if he does not firmly promise to repay it at a certain time. He desires to make such a promise, but he has enough conscience to ask himself whether it is not improper and opposed to duty to relieve his distress in such a way. Now, assuming he does decide to do so, the maxim of his action would be as follows: When I believe myself to be in need of money, I will borrow money and promise to repay it, although I know I shall never do so. Now this principle of self-love or of his own benefit may very well be compatible with his whole future welfare, but the question is whether it is right. He changes the pretension of self-love into a universal law and then puts the question: How would it be if my maxim became a universal law? He immediately sees that it could never hold as a universal law of nature and be consistent with itself; rather it must necessarily contradict itself. For the universality of a law which says that anyone who believes himself to be in need could promise what he pleased with the intention of not fulfilling it would make the promise itself and the end to be accomplished by it impossible; no one would believe what was promised to him but would only laugh at any such assertion as vain pretense.

3. A third finds in himself a talent which could, by means of some cultivation, make him in many respects a useful man. But he finds himself in comfortable circumstances and prefers indulgence in pleasure to troubling himself with broadening and improving his fortunate natural gifts. Now, however, let him ask whether his maxim of neglecting his gifts, besides agreeing with his propensity to idle amusement, agrees also with what is called duty. He sees that a system of nature could indeed exist in accordance with such a law, even though man (like the inhabitants of the South Sea islands) should let his talents rust and resolve to devote his life merely to idleness, indulgence, and propagation — in a word, to pleasure. But he cannot possibly will that this should become a universal law of nature or that it should be implanted in us by a natural instinct. For, as a rational being, he necessarily wills that all his faculties should be developed, inasmuch as they are given to him for all sorts of possible purposes.

4. A fourth man, for whom things are going well, sees that others (whom he could help) have to struggle with great hardships, and he asks, “What concern of mine is it? Let each one be as happy as heaven wills, or as he can make himself; I will not take anything from him or even envy him; but to his welfare or to his assistance in time of need I have no desire to contribute.” If such a way of thinking were a universal law of nature, certainly the human race could exist, and without doubt even better than in a state where everyone talks of sympathy and good will, or even exerts himself occasionally to practice them while, on the other hand, he cheats when he can and betrays or otherwise violates the rights of man. Now although it is possible that a universal law of nature according to that maxim could exist, it is nevertheless impossible to will that such a principle should hold everywhere as a law of nature. For a will which resolved this would conflict with itself, since instances can often arise in which he would need the love and sympathy of others, and in which he would have robbed himself, by such a law of nature springing from his own will, of all hope of the aid he desires.

[Perfect and Imperfect Duties]

The foregoing are a few of the many actual duties, or at least of duties we hold to be actual, whose derivation from the one stated principle is clear. We must be able to will that a maxim of our action become a universal law; this is the canon of the moral estimation of our action generally. Some actions are of such a nature that their maxim cannot even be thought as a universal law of nature without contradiction, far from it being possible that one could will that it should be such. In others this internal impossibility is not found, though it is still impossible to will that their maxim should be raised to the universality of a law of nature, because such a will would contradict itself. We easily see that the former maxims conflicts with the stricter or narrower (imprescriptible) duty, the latter with broader (meritorious) duty. Thus all duties, so far as the kind of obligation (not the object of their action) is concerned, have been completely exhibited by these examples in their dependence on the one principle. […]