

Kant's Categorical Imperative and Duty

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Abstract

The categorical imperative is the central philosophical concept in the deontological moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Introduced in Kant's 1785 Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, it may be defined as a way of evaluating motivations for action.

Keywords: Categorical Duty; Autonomy; Universal Law; Immanuel Kant.

1. Introduction

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) was a German philosopher who is a central figure in modern philosophy. Kant argued that the human mind creates the structure of human experience, that reason is the source of morality, that aesthetics arises from a faculty of disinterested judgment, that space and time are forms of human sensibility, and that the world as it is "in-itself" is independent of man's concepts of it. Kant took himself to have effected a "Copernican revolution" in philosophy, akin to Copernicus' reversal of the age-old belief that the sun revolved around the earth. His beliefs continue to have a major influence on contemporary philosophy, especially the fields of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political theory and esthetics. Immanuel Kant dealt with the best traditions of the German idealism. A human personality, according to Kant is the highest and absolute value. It is the personality, in Kant's understanding, that towers the person over its own self and links the human being with the "order of things". The "order of things", according to Kant is the reflection of the "common sense". The whole perceived world around us complies with the "order of things". The most interesting part of Kant's philosophy is that his own notion of the "order of things" and "common sense" is dual in case of analyzing it.

2. Nature of Categorical Imperative

According to Kant, human beings occupy a special place in creation, and morality can be summed up in an imperative, or ultimate commandment of reason, from which all duties and obligations derive. He defined an imperative as any proposition declaring a certain action (or inaction) to be necessary. Kant said that an "imperative" is something that a person must do. For example: if a person wants to stop being thirsty, it is imperative that they have a drink. Kant said an imperative is "categorical," when it is true at all times, and in all situations.

Instead of the hypothetical imperative, Kant said that the moral choices are governed by a categorical imperative. The categorical imperative is something that a person must do, no matter what the circumstances. It is imperative to an ethical person that they make choices based on the categorical imperative. Another way of saying that, is that an ethical person follows a "universal law" regardless of their situation.

3. Idea of Maxim, Hypothetical Imperative and Categorical Imperative

Hypothetical imperatives apply to someone who wishes to attain certain ends. For example:

If I wish to quench my thirst, I must drink something.

If I wish to pass this exam, I must study.

A categorical imperative, on the other hand, denotes an absolute, unconditional requirement that must be obeyed in all circumstances and is justified as an end in itself. It is best known in its first formulation: Act

Kant's Categorical Imperative and Duty

only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.

Kant explained his ideas about following the categorical imperative by introducing one more idea he called a "maxim." A maxim is another way of saying what we want to do and why we want to do it in one sentence. We can learn ethical maxims by applying the test of the categorical imperative. And he said we can live ethical lives if we use these maxims whenever we make decisions.

The categorical imperative, hypothetical imperative, and the maxim can all be seen in the example of the thirsty man.

A man locked alone in a room for one night, and he brought nothing with him except a bottle of water. The man has had nothing to drink all day and is very thirsty. We can call this man, "Thirsty Man."

A hypothetical imperative might be that *"a thirsty man must drink water if he wants to stop being thirsty."* If Thirsty Man lived by a maxim based on this hypothetical imperative, it might be *"If I can, I will drink water whenever I am thirsty."*

In this example, Thirsty Man is not making any obvious moral choice. Some philosophers would say that the Thirsty Man's maxim is a reasonable one. Based on Thirsty Man's maxim, he will soon drink the water.

A few minutes later a second man is brought into the room. Both men are told that they will be in the room all night, and that no one else will be back to see them until morning.

Thirsty Man has not yet opened the water bottle. The new man has not had anything to drink for many days. The second man is clearly dying of dehydration. If he is not given water soon he will die. We can call this second man, "Dying Man."

Thirsty Man now has a decision to make, will he share the water or drink it himself?

Thirsty Man does not live by the maxim of "I will drink water when I am thirsty," because that maxim fails the test of being universally fulfilling the *categorical imperative*.

Thirsty Man believes that the categorical imperative is the Golden Rule. To be an ethical person, Thirsty Man believes he must at all times treat others the way he would want them to treat him. From the categorical imperative of the Golden Rule, Thirsty Man has adopted a maxim of *"I will give anything I can to anyone I meet, if that person needs what I have much more than I need it."*

Thirsty Man prepares to decide if he will drink the water that he wants to drink, or if he will give it to Dying Man. Thirsty Man tests both choices by comparing them to his maxim. He sees that it is *imperative* that he give the water to Dying Man.

Thirsty Man gives the water to Dying Man. Dying Man drinks nearly the entire bottle, but then he chokes on the last sip. There is nothing Thirsty Man can do to stop the choking, and Dying Man dies.

Kant's idea of the categorical imperative would say that Thirsty Man made the right choice, for the right reasons, and he made those ethical decisions in a logical way.

4. First Expression of the Categorical Imperative

The first version or expression of the categorical imperative: Act in a way that the rule for your action could be universalized. There are two ideas of duties. **Perfect duties** and **imperfect duties**. The categorical imperative is free from fads. Morality applies to all rational beings, and a moral action is defined as one that is determined by reason, not by our sensual impulses. Because an action is moral on account of its being reasoned, the moral worth of an action is determined by its motive, or the reason behind the action, not by its consequences. We can determine the worth of the motive behind any given moral action by asking whether we could turn that motive into a universally applicable maxim. Reason is the same at all times and for all people, so morality too should be universal. Therefore, an action is moral only if it embodies a maxim that we could will to be a universal law.

When you're thinking about doing something, this means you should imagine that *everyone did it all the time*. Now, can this make sense? Can it happen? *Is there a world you can imagine where everyone does this thing that you're considering at every opportunity?*

What we need to do is imagine this act as universalized: everyone lies all the time. Just imagine that. You ask someone whether it's sunny outside. It is sunny, but they say, "No, it's raining." The next day you ask someone else. Again, it's sunny, but they say, "No, it's snowing." This goes on day after day. Pretty soon, wouldn't you just give up listening to what people say? Here's the larger point: if everyone lies all the time, pretty soon people are going to stop listening to anyone. And if no one's listening, is it possible to lie to them? What Kant's categorical imperative shows is that lying *cannot* be universalized. The act of lying can't survive in a world where everyone's just making stuff up all the time. Since no one will be taking anyone else seriously, you may try to sell a false story but no one will be buying. The categorical imperative is free from fad.

5. Second Expression of the Categorical Imperative

The second expression of the categorical imperative is: Treat people as an end, and never as a means to an end. This is a dignity principle: treat others with respect and as holding value in themselves. You will act ethically, according to Kant, as long as you never accept the temptation to treat others as a way to get something else. To treat people as ends, not means is to never use anyone to get something else. People can't be tools or instruments, they can't be things you employ to get to what you *really* want. The slavery tradition is not ethical. Because this tradition uses man as a way, not as an aim.

Kant's Categorical Imperative and Duty

For an example, Andrew, who donated time and money to the cause of treating cancer. On one hand, this seems like a generous and beneficial treatment of others. It looks like he's valuing them as worthwhile and good people who deserve to be saved from a disease. On the other hand, though, when you keep in mind that Andrew too had cancer, you wonder whether he's just using other peoples' suffering to promote research so that *he* can be saved.

The principal objection to this aspect of Kant's theory is that, like the previous, it sounds good in the abstract, but when you think about how it would actually work, things become difficult. Almost *all* businesses require treating people as means and not as ends. In the grocery store, the cashier isn't waiting there to receive your respectful attention. She's there to run your items through the scanner and that's it. The same goes for the guy in the produce section setting up the banana display. Really, just *paying* someone to do a job—no matter what the job might be—is treating them as a means to an end, as little more than a way to get the work done.

6. Third Expression of the Categorical Imperative

The third expression of the categorical imperative is: Kant claims that the first formulation lays out the objective conditions on the categorical imperative: that it be universal in form and thus capable of becoming a law of nature. Likewise, the second formulation lays out subjective conditions: that there be certain ends in themselves. The result of these two considerations is that we must will maxims that can be at the same time universal, but which do not hurt on the freedom of ourselves nor of others. Thus the third practical principle follows [from the first two] as the ultimate condition of their harmony with practical reason: the idea of the will of every rational being as a universally legislating will. This third formulation makes it clear that the categorical imperative requires autonomy.

7. Other Expressions of the Categorical Imperative

Everyone is bound to obey moral order. Every ethical regulation is for the welfare for human. These rules are universal. So these rules are for everyone.

Moral orders are categorical .Moral orders are certain and impartial.

Criticisms

- 1) This theory can't be explained according to some critics.
- 2) William Lillie told in his book "An Introduction to Ethics" that moral rules cannot be considered as categorical.
- 3) Kant told about the forms of moral rules. But he didn't tell about the elements of moral rules.
- 4) There is no way of emotion in his theory. But without this, the duty is out of duty's emotion.

5) The first formulation of the Categorical Imperative appears similar to The Golden Rule.

8. Duty for Duty Sake in Kantian Ethics

Kant's project in the *Groundwork* is "the search for and establishment of the supreme principle of morality" The establishment of moral principles and moral laws culminated in formulations of the categorical imperative which is the form of all properly moral principles. This categorical imperative arise from reason. It is the universal and supreme principle of morality which admits of no conditions or exceptions because there is nothing higher by reference to which conditions or exceptions could be justified. For Kant there is a single moral obligation, which he called the "categorical imperative", and it is derived from the concept of duty. Duty comes in as the practice of this categorical imperative. In fact, in Kant's theory, the fundamental moral law is the categorical imperative and remains the ground of ethical duties.

For Kant, duty is a necessity to act from an obligation. And that necessity needs to be objective and universal in order to have moral value and has no need to refer to any Supreme Being except autonomy and good will grounded on pure reason. Kant writes, "A will whose maxims necessarily accord with the laws of autonomy is a *holy*, or absolute good, will. The dependence of the will not absolutely good on the principle of autonomy (that is, moral necessitation) is *obligation*. Obligation can thus have no reference to a holy being. The objective necessity to act from obligation is called duty."

For Kant, an action fulfilling an ethical duty has greater moral merit if it is performed from duty, but the incentive from which we perform a right action makes no difference to its juridical rightness. Under human conditions, where we have to struggle against unruly impulses, inclinations and desires, a good will is manifested in acting for the sake of duty. In this paper, I will study this concept of duty in Kantian ethics, its motives, its meanings, its grounds in link with his philosophical thought in general. I will demonstrate the originality of the concept "duty" and show that Kant "***provided a very different account of ordinary moral reasoning,***" for the performance of juridical duties may be externally coerced, but Kant's basic conception of ethical or moral duty is inner or self-constraint. Duties are ends in themselves. These ends based on the categorical imperative, are exceedingly important to the structure of Kantian morality. For Kant, all ethical duties are grounded on ends that is why his theory of ethical duties is entirely teleological.

9. Kantian's Concept of Duty

Why duty is an odious word? Asked one of Kantian scholars Allen wood. According to him, "Duty is not only a crucial concept in Kant's ethics but also in effect a technical term in Kantian vocabulary." Whatever affinity the Kantian sense of 'duty' may have with the ordinary meaning of the word in, must depend on our putting some distance between the technical Kantian meaning of his word "duty" and the sense of the term as it is used commonly.

Kant's Categorical Imperative and Duty

In general understanding, ***“duty is what a person is obligated or required to do.*** Duties can be moral, legal, parental, occupational, professional, etc., all depending on their foundations or grounds. Because a duty can have several grounds, it can be, say, both moral and legal, though it need not be of more than one type.” In this sense, duties are often what we have in consequence of some role we play in a social institution, arrangement, or relationship.

The danger of this common understanding of duty is that people therefore appeal to duty when they want to put an end to critical reflection about what we are doing. Soldiers are supposed to think of their duty to their unit, to their commanders, to their “mission”, to their country, to their flag and nothing else. This understanding of duty makes them fearless and killing machines without guilt consciousness. Kantian theory and understanding of “duty” will give answer to such dilemma and show that it is a new technical concept.

For Kant, duty has a strong link with good will. In his explanations, “duty” refers to the act of freely making oneself to desire something and do it because he appreciates moral reasons there are for doing it. Therefore, “to do something from duty means: to obey reason.” Obedience here signifies neither external authority nor coercion but only that the reasons are moral reasons, as distinct from merely instrumental or prudential reasons. Acting from duty do not obey any law except one of good will or self-constraint to respect moral law. “Kant gives the name “duty” to all actions we have moral reasons to do, even meritorious actions that are not morally blamable to omit, because (human nature being what it is), we will occasionally need to exercise inner rational constraint if we are to perform these morally valuable actions.”

10. The Motives of Duty

A human action is morally good, not because it is done from immediate inclination, or from self-interest, but because it is done for the sake of duty. Thus the motive of duty includes all the properly moral reasons we have to perform morally valuable actions. Kant distinguishes two essential elements that can motivate our actions. As far as the realizations of our duties are concerned, Kant suggest that we should ***act from duty*** instead of ***acting for the sake of duty.***

Acting from Duty: Perfect Duties

In the beginning of the second section of *Groundwork*, Kant says that the only thing in this world or outside of it that is good without limitations is the good will. He stipulates that acting from duty is a supreme value of morality and the only motive of moral law because it has his source from reason or self-legislation: “Thus ***morality*** lies in the relation of our actions to the autonomy of the will—that is to a possible making of universal law by means of its maxims. An action which is compatible with the autonomy of the will is *permitted*; one which does not harmonize with it is *forbidden*.”

What does Kant mean by “**acting from duty**”? I said above already that the concept “duty” itself is technical, confusing and perilous enough. We saw that “duty is the necessity of an action from the respect for the law” and that the term “law” refers to any practical principle of reason that is objectively and universally valid for all rational beings and it has to be necessary. This necessity refers to what Kant calls “*Practical necessitation*” and means what is constraint. This constraint or obligation does not refer to external constraint or coercion, as by chains, prison, prison walls, or threats, **but rather the inner rational self-constraint** that one exercises over oneself from respect for correct principles. As Allen Wood would summarize it, “*To act from duty*, in short, is to do something because you know that an objectively valid moral principle demands it, so that gives you a good reason for deciding to do it, and then making yourself do it.”

As we know, Kant is never interested in the difference between *good and bad actions*, or between actions worthy of moral and actions unworthy of it. He is much more interested in the intentionality of the moral agent. Self-esteem, honor, good reputation, sympathy or compassion can never be, by themselves source of moral worth. His concern is “what is an authentic, genuine moral worth?” The answer is that any action has moral worth when the moral agent acts from duty only. Kant insists that duty is the necessity to act out of reverence for the law. Therefore, Perfect Duties do not allow the leeway in the interest of inclination. They don’t permit one to choose among several possible ways of fulfilling them. Thus, the duty to help those in need is an imperfect duty since it can be fulfilled by helping the sick, the starving, the oppressed, etc. But if one chooses to help the sick, one can choose which of the sick to help. However, the duty to keep one’s promises and the duty not to harm others are perfect duties since they do not allow one to choose which promises to keep or which people not to harm.

Acting for the Sake of Duty: Imperfect Duties

For Kant, the first problem of legal duties is conformism. It is necessary to do one’s duty from the motive of duty. “For if any action is to be morally good, it is not enough that it should conform to the moral law, it must also be done for the sake of the moral law: where there is not so, the conformity is only too contingent and precarious, since the non-moral ground at work will now and then produce actions which is in accord with the law, but very often which transgress it.”

To act for the sake of duty lack moral worth and therefore has some insufficiency. As Kant himself suggested, it is very important to make a difference between to act from duty and to act for the sake of duty. Not all actions that are “in conformity with duty” are “from duty”. This has to be well understood. According to Kant, some dutiful good actions, though possible occasions for self-constraint, do not need to be done with self-constraint, because they agree with some of our immediate inclination, empirical desire, or instinct. For such actions, there is no claim of morality worth because reason, self-constraint and good will are not fully involved in decision making and doing. In other words, we can or should act from

Kant's Categorical Imperative and Duty

duty only and no self-interest reason or empirical inclination is sufficient to motivate us to perform an action. Acting from duty is a pull against our empirical inclinations.

Therefore, only few human actions can belong to the class of moral actions because in order to be logically valid they must be based on pure reason; and in order to be good, an action must only be performed for the sake of a moral law and not for some other purpose. I like Kant philosophy because of the rigorist of his moral principles and we can see that there is no room for compromise. Like categorical imperative, duties are principles that are intrinsically valid; they are good ends in themselves, they must be obeyed in all, and by all situations and circumstances. Whenever there is no good will, no self-legislation, no autonomy, therefore no moral worth. It is conformism which create imperfect duties. Imperfect duties are, in Kant's words, "duties which allow leeway in the interest of inclination," and "permit one to choose among several possible ways of fulfilling them."

11. Duties of Virtue

In Kant philosophy, ethical duties are duties of virtue. His ethics are merely "the Doctrine of Virtue" and ethical virtues are "the obligatory ends of pure practical reason". In the Critique of Practical Reason, Kant describes "virtue" as a naturally acquired faculty of a non-holy will or "the moral disposition in the struggle. Virtue is characterized by "moral strength of a human being's will in fulfilling his duty. In fact Kant believes that all ends are duties but not virtues. Imperfect or wide duties should guide us in setting the ends of life: my own perfection and happiness of others. This section will be interesting in the sense that we are going to see when and how our own duties and ends must combine at the same time one's happiness and perfections of others in order to be morally good. Human beings have the duty to act from duty.

11.1 Duties to Oneself

In the Western but mainly Anglophone tradition of moral philosophy, the concept of duty to oneself is commonly applied to alleged duties to promote one's welfare. For Kant, the rational claims of our own happiness rest on prudential reason, not moral reason. Because our own happiness is something we inevitably pursue from prudence without the constraint of duty. Thus, in Kantian Ethics, the concept of a duty to oneself has nothing to do with self-interest, self-love, honor, egocentrism or any duty to promote one's happiness. "My duty towards myself cannot be treated juridical; the law touches only our relations with other men; I have no legal obligations towards myself; and whatever I do to myself I do to a consenting party; I cannot not commit an act of injustice against myself."

For Kant, human freedom limits moral agent to anything which is not rational. Therefore, everything would depend on how and individual determined his own happiness; for our self-regarding duties would consist in the universal rule to satisfy all our inclinations in order to further our happiness. This would, however, militate seriously against doing our duties towards others. "in fact, the principle of self-regarding duties is

a very different one, *which has no connection with our well-being or earthly happiness*. Far from ranking lowest in the scale of precedence, our duties towards ourselves are of primary importance and should have pride of place; for (...) it is obvious that nothing can be expected from a man who dishonors his own person.”[14] Consequently, according to Kant, “The most serious offence against the duty one owes to oneself is suicide.” For Kant suicide is abominable not because it is forbidden by God or by any religious or civil law. “Suicide is an abomination because it implies the abuse of man’s freedom of action: He uses freedom to destroy himself. His freedom should be employed to enable him to live as a man.”[16] Duties to ourselves as moral beings in effect are duties regarding our humanity and our rational capacity to set ends and treat ourselves as ends. And if I can take the example of suicide, a man who commits such crime does not use humanity as end but as a means to fulfill his irrational happiness. Thus, it goes against the principle of autonomy, freedom, and self-legislation.

4.2. Duties towards Others.

For Kant duties towards others are divided into duties of love and duties of respect. This distinction is in accordance with the feeling that accompany their performance, but the content of these duties is to conduct ourselves in a certain ways, not a duty to feel anything.

11.2 Duties of Love

According to Kant, duties of love are duties to benefit others (MS 6:450), while duties of respect are duties to avoid humiliating them and enabling them to maintain their self-respect (MS 6:449). Kant further divides the duties of love into duties of beneficence, gratitude and sympathetic participation. According to him, we have the duty to place the happiness of others among our ends, and the wide duty to return benefits to those who have benefited us. Kant thinks that the duty of sympathetic participation is important and above duty of beneficence and gratitude. For this reason he names it “humanity”. It is important because humanity includes the duty to cultivate the feeling of sympathy in order to strengthen our sensibility to the needs of others and strengthen our capacity to perform duties of beneficence. According to Wood, “The duty of ‘sympathetic participation’ deserves special mention, because the conception itself is perhaps not an obvious one and because appreciating its role in Kantian ethics will help to correct important elements in prevailing false image of Kantian ethics.” Concluding this topic, Kant says that participation, along with love, is also something we all need from other human beings.

11.3 Duties of Respect

For Kant, respecting others requires us to moderate our own self-esteem to allow for proper recognition of the dignity of others. Kant include under the duty not to ‘give scandal’ or to tempt other into the acts for which they will later have reason to reproach themselves. Kantian ethics recognizes only that respect which is grounded in human dignity (a value that cannot be surpassed or added to), and therefore, it appraises all

Kant's Categorical Imperative and Duty

human beings as of equal absolute worth. From this logic, true merits are shameful and vicious. “Kantian ethics holds that where morality is concerned, we should compare ourselves with the moral law or the idea of virtue, but never with others (VE 27:349, 462, MS 6:435-436). Human achievements have value, but they give the achiever no higher self-worth.” Duties of respect follow the basic principle that all human beings are equal in dignity as ends in themselves.

12. Conclusion

Immanuel Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals develops the logical foundation for a moral philosophy which is based on *a priori* rather than empirical principles. Kant's concern to provide a theory of pure practical reason for moral philosophy is thereby to establish a supreme principle of morality which have universal validity. The moral worth of an act derives from the principle on which the action is performed. The concept of “duty” is the center of Kantian Ethics. *Duty* is the necessity to act out of reverence to the law. Kant made a difference between acting from duty and acting for the sake of duty. We saw that only in the second one there is moral worth because it is the motive or the intentionality of an action that determines its moral value. As Dr Chackalackal concludes on Kant's duty: “Hence the absolute law of reason for Kant is duty itself. The injunction of the *Metaphysic of Morals* is clear: “Do your duty from the motive of duty.” We must do our duty for the sake of duty because Reason commands us to do it. It is a self-constraint act whose motive is the duty itself. The nature of moral duty and the good will are inseparable and closely related. In order to be moral, any moral agent has to act from duty itself or it is our duty to act from duty with the good will. It would not be a duty to pursue a certain effect of our will, if it were not possible to do so. Kant's “ought” implies “can”.

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