



Immanuel Kant

CHAPTER 12

Duty and Reason

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), whose writings are required reading for all who desire to understand nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought, lived a life singularly without incident. Kant lived by routine, and, although he had many friends, he never married and never ventured more than forty miles from Königsberg, East Prussia, the city of his birth and death. The German writer Heine, though without doubt exercising some poetic license, has immortalized Kant as an automaton: “Rising, coffee drinking, writing, lecturing, dining, walking each had its set time. And when Immanuel Kant, in his gray coat, cane in hand, appeared at the door of his house, and strolled towards the small avenue of linden trees which is still called ‘The Philosopher’s Walk,’ the neighbors knew it was exactly half-past-three by the clock.”

The Kant family belonged to the lower middle class and was devoutly religious. In recognition of his son’s academic ability and because of the family’s religious persuasion, Immanuel’s father sent him to the local Pietistic College to prepare for the ministry. Immanuel continued his studies at the University of Königsberg and became increasingly interested in natural science and philosophy. Between 1746 and 1755, he supported himself as a private teacher for various landed families in and around his native city. He was then appointed to an instructorship at his university and finally, in 1770, was promoted to a full professorship. Kant was a popular and successful teacher. Perhaps surprisingly for one who was so rigorous in his own thinking, he is reputed to have given the following advice in practical pedagogy: “Attend most to the student of middle ability, the dunces are beyond help, and the geniuses help themselves.”

Kant’s inner life was as dramatic as his outer life was drab: He renounced the external and emotional side of religion; he evolved from a man-of-letters philosopher with a free and flowing style of writing and thinking into a “critical” philosopher with a labored style of presenting uncompromisingly profound thoughts; he transformed a

spontaneous scientific curiosity into an impulse to explore the foundations of science; at first a passive follower of an accepted school of philosophy, he became the innovator of an important school of thought. What is more, he took a passionate interest in the American and French revolutions. The conservative outer mien of Kant was a deceptive façade for the inner Kant.

The most important of Kant's scientific writings is his *General Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755), in which he accounts for the origin of the solar system by formulating the nebular hypothesis. His revolutionary philosophical work is *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), in which he is concerned to demonstrate that it is possible to have certain knowledge in the natural sciences and mathematics. In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), he analyzes aesthetics and biology. Kant endeavors to show the foundations of genuine morality in *The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788); in the latter he investigates the implications of morality for religion.

The direction of Kant's philosophical interests is revealed in his reflection that "two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe . . . *the starry heavens above and the moral law within.*" His concern is with nature and morality. Against the background of eighteenth-century skepticism, which called into question the foundations of scientific knowledge and morality, he proposes a comprehensive system of the universe in which their certainty is guaranteed. According to Kant, skepticism results from the error of seeking a basis for certainty where it cannot be found, in the *content* of experience. The grounds of certainty, he asserts, are located in the *form* of reason itself. Accordingly, he undertakes an intensive examination of the nature of thought to show how we can have certain knowledge of both scientific facts and moral duties.

Kant demonstrates by an analysis of knowledge that the necessity and universality of scientific knowledge are guaranteed by the laws through which the categories (concepts) of the mind become effective.¹ They are the forms of all possible knowledge and are not limited to some specific content. For example, it is the nature of the mind to think in accordance with the principle that every event must have a cause. The concept of causality that enters into the principle is one of the categories of the understanding. Thus, despite our ignorance of the cause of a given disease, we are nevertheless certain that it has a cause, and this certainty is a product of mind, not of observation. Although it is generally held that nature itself provides the causal order of our experience, Kant reverses this position, insisting it is the mind that orders our experience causally. Otherwise, we could not be certain, as we are, of the causal interconnection of events; for, although experience teaches us what actually happens, it does not teach us what *necessarily* happens. The categories are *a priori*—that is, they are not derived from experience; they are universally applicable to experience; and they are the necessary preconditions of empirical knowledge. Furthermore, though all knowledge necessarily begins with experience, the *a priori* structure of it cannot be gotten by induction from

¹What Kant opposes in skepticism is its theory that knowledge of experience or appearances (*phenomena*) cannot be certain. According to his theory, it is knowledge of ultimate reality or "things-in-themselves" (*noumena*) that is impossible.

experience but can be understood only through examining the presuppositions of our orderly experience of nature.

In his search for the grounds of the validity of ethics, Kant employs the same method by which he establishes the grounds of the certainty of science. A valid moral principle, he tells us, must be independent of the empirical data of morality if it is to be binding on all men. In short, a genuine morality—a morality that is objectively and universally binding—requires an *a priori* foundation. Kant believes that ordinary moral consciousness, or conscience, reveals to every person that moral precepts are universal and necessary—they are valid for all rational beings.

Universal obligation, according to Kant, cannot be discovered by studying such empirical data as human desires or inclinations, for these vary from one person to another. The universal basis of morality in people must lie in their rational nature; this alone is the same in everyone. No so-called moral law is valid if it is not rational—that is to say, if it cannot be applied to all rational beings without contradiction. Putting it another way, a moral principle must be such that one can will that all people, including oneself, should act on it. Kant uses the test of consistency as the core of the fundamental moral law, which he calls the *categorical imperative*: Those actions are right that conform to principles one can consistently will to be principles for everyone, and those actions are wrong that are based on maxims that a rational creature could not will that all persons should follow.

The categorical imperative, then, enables us to distinguish right from wrong actions. However, Kant tells us, it is not only the test but also the unconditional directive for behavior. It is binding on everyone because each rational being acknowledges an obligation to follow reason. The categorical imperative is, in fact, the only basis for determining our duties. Kant argues that the validity of the basic moral law would not be affected even if everyone were to violate it in actual conduct. Reason prescribes duty, and the moral law holds whether or not people actually follow it.

1. As a preliminary to his construction of a pure moral philosophy, Kant makes a critical analysis of the commonly accepted "good" things, such as health, wealth, and friendship. Asking under what conditions these may be considered good, he concludes that they are not good under all circumstances but only insofar as they are conjoined with something that is unqualifiedly good—a *good will*. To Kant, good will represents the effort of rational beings to do what they ought to do, rather than to act from inclination or self-interest.

Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can 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, resolution, perseverance, as qualities of temperament, are undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects; but these gifts of nature may also become extremely bad and mischievous if the will which is to make use of them, and which, therefore, constitutes what is called *character*, is not good. It is the same with the *gifts of fortune*. Power, riches, honor, even

health, and the general well-being and contentment with one's condition which is called *happiness*, inspire pride, and often presumption, if there is not a good will to correct the influence of these on the mind, and with this also to rectify the whole principle of acting, and adapt it to its end. The sight of a being who is not adorned with a single feature of a pure and good will, enjoying unbroken prosperity, can never give pleasure to an impartial rational spectator. Thus a good will appears to constitute the indispensable condition even of being worthy of happiness.

There are even some qualities which are of service to this good will itself, and may facilitate its action, yet which have no intrinsic unconditional value, but always presuppose a good will, and this qualifies the esteem that we justly have for them, and does not permit us to regard them as absolutely good. Moderation in the affections and passions, self-control and calm deliberation are not only good in many respects, but even seem to constitute part of the intrinsic worth of the person; but they are far from deserving to be called good without qualification, although they have been so unconditionally praised by the ancients. For without the principles of a good will, they may become extremely bad, and the coolness of a villain not only makes him far more dangerous, but also directly makes him more abominable in our eyes than he would have been without it.^a

2. The good will is not good because it achieves good results. Even if it were unable to attain the ends it seeks, it would still be good in itself and have a higher worth than the superficial things gained by immoral actions.

A good will is good not because of what it performs or effects, not by its aptness for the attainment of some proposed end, but simply by virtue of the volition, that is, it is good in itself, and considered by itself is to be esteemed much higher than all that can be brought about by it

in favor of any inclination, nay, even of the sum total of all inclinations. Even if it should happen that, owing to special disfavor of fortune, or the niggardly provision of a step-motherly nature, this will should wholly lack power to accomplish its purpose, if with its greatest efforts it should yet achieve nothing, and there should remain only the good will (not, to be sure, a mere wish, but the summoning of all means in our power), then, like a jewel, it would still shine by its own light, as a thing which has its whole value in itself. Its usefulness or fruitlessness can neither add to nor take away anything from this value. It would be, as it were, only the setting to enable us to handle it the more conveniently in common commerce, or to attract to it the attention of those who are not yet connoisseurs, but not to recommend it to true connoisseurs, or to determine its value.^b

3. Experience shows that reason is a very inefficient instrument for the achievement of happiness. If nature intended humans to be happy, it would have provided an instinct to this end. What we observe is that the more people cultivate their reason, the less likely they are to find happiness. Kant concludes that reason is not intended to produce happiness but to produce a good will.²

There is, however, something so strange in this idea of the absolute value of the mere will, in which no account is taken of its utility, that notwithstanding the thorough assent of even common reason to the idea, yet a suspicion must arise that it may perhaps really be the

²Note that in emphasizing duty rather than happiness in his ethical theory, Kant does not deny that happiness is desirable for humans. Although he holds that the immediate object of reason is the production of a good will, which is the supreme good (*supremum bonum*), he acknowledges that a person of good will deserves happiness. The supreme good—that is, virtue—when conjoined with happiness in proportion to it, constitutes the greatest good (*summum bonum*).

product of mere high-flown fancy, and that we may have misunderstood the purpose of nature in assigning reason as the governor of our will. Therefore we will examine this idea from this point of view.

In the physical constitution of an organized being, that is, a being adapted suitably to the purposes of life, we assume it as a fundamental principle that no organ for any purpose will be found but what is also the fittest and best adapted for that purpose. Now in a being which has reason and a will, if the proper object of nature were its *conservation*, its *welfare*, in a word, its *happiness*, then nature would have hit upon a very bad arrangement in selecting the reason of the creature to carry out this purpose. For all the actions which the creature has to perform with a view to this purpose, and the whole rule of its conduct, would be far more surely prescribed to it by instinct, and that end would have been attained thereby much more certainly than it ever can be by reason. Should reason have been communicated to this favored creature over and above, it must only have served it to contemplate the happy constitution of its nature, to admire it, to congratulate itself thereon, and to feel thankful for it to the beneficent cause, but not that it should subject its desires to that weak and delusive guidance, and meddle bunglingly with the purpose of nature. In a word, nature would have taken care that reason should not break forth into *practical exercise*, nor have the presumption, with its weak insight, to think out for itself the plan of happiness, and of the means of attaining it. Nature would not only have taken on herself the choice of the ends, but also of the means, and with wise foresight would have entrusted both to instinct.

And, in fact, we find that the more a cultivated reason applies itself with deliberate purpose to the enjoyment of life and happiness, so much the more does the man fail of true satisfaction. And from this circumstance there arises in many, if they are candid enough to confess it, a certain degree of *misology*, that is, hatred of reason, especially in the case of those who are

most experienced in the use of it, because after calculating all the advantages they derive, I do not say from the invention of all the arts of common luxury, but even from the sciences (which seem to them to be after all only a luxury of the understanding), they find that they have, in fact, only brought more trouble on their shoulders, rather than gained in happiness; and they end by envying, rather than despising, the more common stamp of men who keep closer to the guidance of mere instinct, and do not allow their reason much influence on their conduct. And this we must admit, that the judgment of those who would very much lower the lofty eulogies of the advantages which reason give us in regard to the happiness and satisfaction of life, or who would even reduce them below zero, is by no means morose or ungrateful to the goodness with which the world is governed, but that there lies at the root of these judgments the idea that our existence has a different and far nobler end, for which, and not for happiness, reason is properly intended, and which must, therefore, be regarded as the supreme condition to which the private ends of man must, for the most part, be postponed.

For as reason is not competent to guide the will with certainty in regard to its objects and the satisfaction of all our wants (which it to some extent even multiplies), this being an end to which an implanted instinct would have led with much greater certainty; and since, nevertheless, reason is imparted to us as a practical faculty, *i.e.*, as one which is to have influence on the *will*, therefore, admitting that nature generally in the distribution of her capacities has adapted the means to the end, its true destination must be to produce a *will*, not merely good as a *means* to something else, but *good in itself*, for which reason was absolutely necessary. This will then, though not indeed the sole and complete good, must be the supreme good and the condition of every other, even of the desire of happiness. Under these circumstances, there is nothing inconsistent with the wisdom of nature in the fact that the cultivation of the reason, which is requisite for the first and unconditional

purpose, does in many ways interfere, at least in this life, with the attainment of the second, which is always conditional, namely, happiness. Nay, it may even reduce it to nothing, without nature thereby failing of her purpose. For reason recognizes the establishment of a good will as its highest practical destination, and in attaining this purpose is capable only of a satisfaction of its own proper kind, namely, that from the attainment of an end, which end again is determined by reason only, notwithstanding that this may involve many a disappointment to the ends of inclination.^c

4. Kant then proceeds to explain the relationship between a good will and duty: A good will is one that acts for the sake of duty. Indeed, human actions have inner moral worth only if they are performed *from* duty. Actions that result from inclination or self-interest may be praiseworthy if they happen, for whatever reason, to accord with duty, but they have no inner worth. For example, a woman who preserves her life in routine conformity to duty is acting from an inclination that is *according* to duty, but not *from* duty. On the other hand, to preserve life when it has become a burden, only because duty requires it, is *morally* correct.

Kant does not mean that doing one's duty is always, or even generally, unpleasant. However, when our desires lead to actions that happen to conform to duty, we cannot be sure that the consciousness of duty, rather than inclination, was our motive. We can better discern the efficacy of dutifulness where it stands alone or in opposition to other motives. This, not disapproval of ordinary human motives, is what leads Kant to choose examples that are rather cold and unpleasant.

Kant warns that those who fail to understand properly the concept of duty may be tempted to act from motives that may be in accordance with duty or may be contrary to it. But even action in accordance with duty

is not enough; only respect for duty gives an action inner moral worth.

We have then to develop the notion of a will which deserves to be highly esteemed for itself, and is good without a view to anything further, a notion which exists already in the sound natural understanding, requiring rather to be cleared up than to be taught, and which in estimating the value of our actions always takes the first place, and constitutes the condition of all the rest. In order to do this we will take the notion of duty, which includes that of a good will, although implying certain subjective restrictions and hindrances. These, however, far from concealing it, or rendering it unrecognizable, rather bring it out by contrast, and make it shine forth so much the brighter.

I omit here all actions which are already recognized as inconsistent with duty, although they may be useful for this or that purpose, for with these the question whether they are done *from duty* cannot arise at all, since they even conflict with it. I also set aside those actions which really conform to duty, but to which men have *no* direct *inclination*, performing them because they are impelled thereto by some other inclination. For in this case we can readily distinguish whether the action which agrees with duty is done *from duty*, or from a selfish view. It is much harder to make this distinction when the action accords with duty, and the subject has besides a *direct* inclination to it. For example, it is always a matter of duty that a dealer should not overcharge an inexperienced purchaser, and wherever there is much commerce the prudent tradesman does not overcharge, but keeps a fixed price for everyone, so that a child buys of him as well as any other. Men are thus *honestly* served; but this is not enough to make us believe that the tradesman has so acted from duty and from principles of honesty: his own advantage required it; it is out of the question in this case to suppose that he might besides have a direct inclination in favor of the buyers, so that as it were, from love he should give no advantage to one over another. Accordingly the action was

one neither from duty nor from direct inclination, but merely with a selfish view.

On the other hand, it is a duty to maintain one's life; and, in addition, everyone has also a direct inclination to do so. But on this account we often anxious care which most men take for it has no intrinsic worth, and their maxim has no moral import. They preserve their life *as duty requires*, no doubt, but not *because duty requires*. On the other hand, if adversity and hopeless sorrow have completely taken away the relish for life; if the unfortunate one, strong in mind, indignant at his fate rather than desponding or dejected, wishes for death, and yet preserves his life without loving it—not from inclination or fear, but from duty—then his maxim has a moral worth.^d

5. By the use of an illustration, Kant differentiates merely praiseworthy behavior from moral action. Altruistic actions that result from feelings of sociability deserve praise and encouragement, but they cannot be classified as possessing strictly moral value.

To be beneficent when we can is a duty; and besides this, there are many minds so sympathetically constituted that, without any other motive of vanity or self-interest, they find a pleasure in spreading joy around them, and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. But I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however proper, however amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth, but is on a level with other inclinations, *e.g.*, the inclination to honor, which, if it is happily directed to that which is in fact of public utility and accordant with duty, and consequently honorable, deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem. For the maxim lacks the moral import, namely, that such actions be done *from duty*, not from inclination. Put the case that the mind of that philanthropist were clouded by sorrow of his own, extinguishing all sympathy with the lot of others, and that

while he still has the power to benefit others in distress, he is not touched by their trouble because he is absorbed with his own; and now suppose that he tears himself out of this dead insensibility, and performs the action without any inclination to it, but simply from duty, then first has his action its genuine moral worth. Further still; if nature has put little sympathy in the heart of this or that man; if he, supposed to be an upright man, is by temperament cold and indifferent to the sufferings of others, perhaps because in respect of his own he is provided with the special gift of patience and fortitude, and supposes, or even requires, that others should have the same—and such a man would certainly not be the meanest product of nature—but if nature had not specially framed him for a philanthropist, would he not still find in himself a source from whence to give himself a far higher worth than that of a good-natured temperament could be? Unquestionably. It is just in this that the moral worth of the character is brought out which is incomparably the highest of all, namely, that he is beneficent, not from inclination, but from duty.^e

6. Kant's first ethical proposition, then, is that an act must be done from duty in order to have inner moral worth. His second proposition is a development from the first: An act done from duty derives its moral value not from the results it produces but from the principle by which it is determined.

The second proposition is: That an action done from duty derives its moral worth, *not from the purpose* which is to be attained by it, but from the maxim by which it is determined, and therefore does not depend on the realization of the object of the action, but merely on the *principle of volition* by which the action has taken place, without regard to any object of desire. It is clear from what precedes that the purposes which we may have in view of our actions, or their effects regarded as ends and springs of the will, cannot give to actions any unconditional or moral

worth. In what, then, can their worth lie, if it is not to consist in the will and in reference to its expected effect? It cannot lie anywhere but in the *principle of the will* without regard to the ends which can be attained by the action.^f

7. The first two propositions lead Kant to a definition of duty. The morally right action is one done solely out of reverence for the law, and its unique and unconditioned worth is derived from this source.

The third proposition, which is a consequence of the two preceding, I would express thus: *Duty is the necessity of acting from respect for the law.* I may have *inclination* for an object as the effect of my proposed action, but I cannot have *respect* for it, just for this reason, that it is an effect and not an energy of will. Similarly, I cannot have respect for inclination, whether my own or another's; I can at most, if my own, approve it; if another's, sometimes even love it; *i.e.*, look on it as a favorable to my own interest. It is only what is connected with my will as a principle, by no means as an effect—what does not subserve my inclination, but overpowers it, or at least in case of choice excludes it from its calculation—in other words, simply the law of itself, which can be an object of respect, and hence a command. Now an action done from duty must wholly exclude the influence of inclination, and with it every object of the will, so that nothing remains which can determine the will except objectively the *law*, and subjectively *pure respect* for this practical law, and consequently the maxim that I should follow this law even to the thwarting of all my inclinations.

Thus the moral worth of an action does not lie in the effect expected from it, nor in any principle of action which requires to borrow its motive from this expected effect. For all these effects—agreeableness of one's condition, and even the promotion of the happiness of others—could have been also brought about by other causes, so that for this there would have been no need of the will of a rational being;

whereas it is in this alone that the supreme and unconditional good can be found. This preeminent good which we call moral can therefore consist in nothing else than *the conception of law* in itself, *which certainly is only possible in a rational being*, insofar as this conception, and not the expected effect, determines the will. This is a good which is already present in the person who acts accordingly, and we have not to wait for it to appear first in the result.^g

8. The supreme principle or law of morality that the good person must follow is the "categorical imperative." Rational beings, to the extent that they act rationally, will always be guided by ethical principles or maxims that can be adopted by everyone else without generating any contradiction.

But what sort of law can that be, the conception of which must determine the will, even without paying any regard to the effect expected from it, in order that this will may be called good absolutely and without qualification? As I have deprived the will of every impulse which could arise to it from obedience to any law, there remains nothing but the universal conformity of its actions to law in general, which alone is to serve the will as a principle, *i.e.*, I am never to act otherwise than so *that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.* Here now, it is the simple conformity to law in general, without assuming any particular law applicable to certain actions, that serves the will as its principle, and must so serve it, if duty is not to be a vain delusion and a chimerical notion. The common reason of men in its practical judgments perfectly coincides with this, and always has in view the principle here suggested. Let the question be, for example: May I when in distress make a promise with the intention not to keep it? I readily distinguish here between the two significations which the question may have: Whether it is prudent, or whether it is right, to make a false promise. The former may undoubtedly often be the case. I see clearly indeed that it

is not enough to extricate myself from a present difficulty by means of this subterfuge, but it must be well considered whether there may not hereafter spring from this lie much greater inconvenience than that from which I now free myself, and as, with all my supposed *cunning*, the consequences cannot be so easily foreseen but that credit once lost may be much more injurious to me than any mischief which I seek to avoid at present, it should be considered whether it would not be more *prudent* to act herein according to a universal maxim, and to make it a habit to promise nothing except with the intention of keeping it. But it is soon clear to me that such a maxim will still only be based on the fear of consequences. Now it is a wholly different thing to be truthful from duty, and to be so from apprehension of injurious consequences. In the first case, the very notion of the action already implies a law for me; in the second case, I must first look about elsewhere to see what results may be combined with it which would affect myself. For to deviate from the principle of duty is beyond all doubt wicked; but to be unfaithful to my maxim of prudence may often be very advantageous to me, although to abide by it is certainly safer. The shortest way, however, and an unerring one, to discover the answer to this question whether a lying promise is consistent with duty, is to ask myself, Should I be content that my maxim (to extricate myself from difficulty by false promise) should hold good as a universal law, for myself as well as for others? and should I be able to say to myself, "Everyone may make a deceitful promise when he finds himself in a difficulty from which he cannot otherwise extricate himself"? Then I presently become aware that while I can will the lie, I can by no means will that lying should be a universal law. For with such a law there would be no promises at all, since it would be in vain to allege my intention in regard to my future actions to those who would not believe this allegation, or if they over-hastily did so, would pay me back in my own coin. Hence my maxim, as soon as it should be made a universal law, would necessarily destroy itself.^h

9. Kant distinguishes the *categorical* imperative from *hypothetical* imperatives. The former, an unconditional directive, prescribes actions to be done because of the moral worth of the maxim and not for the sake of some consequence that may result. By contrast, a hypothetical imperative is a conditional directive that advises us what ought to be done if a desired goal is to be achieved. For example, "One ought to tell the truth as a matter of principle" is a categorical imperative, whereas "If you want to avoid punishment, you ought to tell the truth" is a hypothetical imperative.

The conception of an objective principle, insofar as it is obligatory for a will, is called a command (of reason), and the formula of the command is called an imperative.

All imperatives are expressed by the word *ought* (or *shall*), and thereby indicate the relation of an objective law of reason to a will, which from its subjective constitution is not necessarily determined by it (an obligation). They say that something would be good to do or to forbear, but they say it to a will which does not always do a thing because it is conceived to be good to do it. That is practically *good*, however, which determines the will by means of the conceptions of reason, and consequently not from subjective causes, but objectively, that is on principles which are valid for every rational being as such. It is distinguished from the *pleasant*, as that which influences the will only by means of sensation from merely subjective causes, valid only for the sense of this or that one, and not as a principle of reason, which holds for everyone. . . .

Now all *imperatives* command either *hypothetically* or *categorically*. The former represent the practical necessity of a possible action as means to something else that is willed (or at least which one might possibly will). The categorical imperative would be that which represented an action as necessary of itself without reference to another end, *i.e.*, as objectively necessary.

Since every practical law represents a possible action as good, and on this account, for a subject who is practically determinable by reason, necessary, all imperatives are formulae determining an action which is necessary according to the principle of a will good in some respects. If now the action is good only as a means *to something else*, then the imperative is *hypothetical*; if it is conceived as good *in itself* and consequently as being necessarily the principle of a will which of itself conforms to reason, then it is *categorical*.¹

10. His first explicit formulation of the categorical imperative requires an individual to obey a maxim that can, without contradiction, be willed to be a rule for everyone. This means the essence of morality lies in acting on the basis of an impersonal principle that is valid for everyone, including oneself.

When I conceive a hypothetical imperative in general I do not know beforehand what it will contain until I am given the condition [under which it is imperative, *viz.*, the desire which makes this imperative suitable to my purposes]. But when I conceive a categorical imperative I know at once what it contains. For as the imperative contains besides the law only the necessity that the maxims shall conform to this law, while the law contains no conditions restricting it, there remains nothing but the general statement that the maxim of the action should conform to a universal law, and it is this conformity alone that the imperative properly represents as necessary.

There is therefore but one categorical imperative, namely this: *Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*

Now if all imperatives of duty can be deduced from this one imperative as from their principle, then, although it should remain undecided whether what is called duty is not merely a vain notion, yet at least we shall be able to show what we understand by it and what this notion means.

Since the universality of the law according to which effects are produced constitutes what is properly called *nature* in the most general sense (as to form), that is the existence of things as far as it is determined by general laws, the imperative of duty may be expressed thus: *Act as if the maxim of thy action were to become by thy will a Universal Law of Nature.*¹

11. Kant conceives the categorical imperative to be a twofold test. It requires first, that maxims for moral action be universalized without logical contradiction, and second, that they be universal directives for action that do not bring the will into disharmony with itself by requiring it to will one thing for itself and another thing for others. Kant illustrates failure at the former level with the first two examples that follow and failure at the latter level with the third and fourth examples.

1. A man reduced to despair by a series of misfortunes feels wearied of life, but is still so far in possession of his reason that he can ask himself whether it would not be contrary to his duty to himself to take his own life. Now he inquires whether the maxim of his action could become a universal law of nature. His maxim is: From self-love I adopt it as a principle to shorten my life when its longer duration is likely to bring more evil than satisfaction. It is asked then simply whether this principle founded on self-love can become a universal law of nature. Now we see at once that a system of nature of which it should be a law to destroy life by means of the very feeling whose special nature it is to impel to the improvement of life would contradict itself, and therefore could not exist as a system of nature; hence that maxim cannot possibly exist as a universal law of nature, and consequently would be wholly inconsistent with the supreme principle of all duty.

2. Another finds himself forced by necessity to borrow money. He knows that he will not be able to repay it, but sees also that nothing will

be lent to him, unless he promises stoutly to repay it in a definite time. He desires to make this promise, but he has still so much conscience as to ask himself: Is it not unlawful and inconsistent with duty to get out of a difficulty in this way? Suppose, however, that he resolves to do so, then the maxim of his action would be expressed thus: When I think myself in want of money, I will borrow money and promise to repay it, although I know that I never can do so. Now this principle of self-love or of one's own advantage may perhaps be consistent with my whole future welfare; but the question now is, Is it right? I change then the suggestion of self-love into a universal law, and state the question thus: How would it be if my maxim were a universal law? Then I see at once that it could never hold as a universal law of nature, but would necessarily contradict itself. For supposing it to be a universal law that everyone when he thinks himself in a difficulty should be able to promise whatever he pleases, with the purpose of not keeping his promise, the promise itself would become impossible, as well as the end that one might have in view in it, since no one would consider that anything was promised to him, but would ridicule all such statements as vain pretenses.

3. A third finds in himself a talent which with the help of some culture might make him a useful man in many respects. But he finds himself in comfortable circumstances, and prefers to indulge in pleasure rather than to take pains in enlarging and improving his happy natural capacities. He asks, however, whether his maxim of neglect of his natural gifts, besides agreeing with his inclination to indulgence, agrees also with what is called duty. He sees then that a system of nature could indeed subsist with such a universal law although men (like the South Sea islanders) should let their talents rust, and resolve to devote their lives merely to idleness, amusement, and propagation of their species—in a word, to enjoyment; but he cannot possibly *will* that this should be a universal law of nature, or be implanted in us as such by a natural instinct. For, as a

rational being, he necessarily wills that his faculties be developed, since they serve him and have been given him, for all sorts of possible purposes.

4. A fourth, who is in prosperity, while he sees that others have to contend with great wretchedness and that he could help them, thinks: What concern is it of mine? Let everyone be as happy as heaven pleases, or as he can make himself; I will take nothing from him nor even envy him, only I do not wish to contribute anything to his welfare or to his assistance in distress! Now no doubt if such a mode of thinking were a universal law, the human race might very well subsist, and doubtless even better than in a state in which everyone talks of sympathy and goodwill, or even takes care occasionally to put it into practice, but on the other side, also cheats when he can, betrays the rights of men, or otherwise violates them. But although it is possible that a universal law of nature might exist in accordance with that maxim, it is impossible to *will* that such a principle should have the universal validity of a law of nature. For a will which resolved this would contradict itself, inasmuch as many cases might occur in which one would have need of the love and sympathy of others, and in which, by such a law of nature, sprung from his own will, he would deprive himself of all hope of the aid he desires.

These are a few of the many actual duties, or at least what we regard as such, which obviously fall into two classes on the one principle that we have laid down. We must be *able to will* that a maxim of our action should be a universal law. This is the canon of the moral appreciation of the action generally. Some actions are of such a character that their maxim cannot without contradiction be even *conceived* as a universal law of nature, far from it being possible that we should *will* that it *should* be so. In others this intrinsic impossibility is not found, but still it is impossible to *will* that their maxim should be raised to the universality of a law of nature, since such a will would contradict itself. It is easily seen that the former violate strict or rigorous (inflexible) duty; the latter only laxer

(meritorious) duty. Thus it has been completely shown by these examples how all duties depend as regards the nature of the obligation (not the object of the action) on the same principle.^k

12. In one of Kant's formulations of the categorical imperative, we see more clearly its social implications. It requires us to *treat all human beings as ends in themselves and never as merely means to ends*. In brief, we should respect all human beings impartially and avoid exploiting anyone. Ends that are ends only because they are desired give us hypothetical imperatives, but if there is an *end in itself*, the imperative to seek it is independent of desire and is therefore a categorical imperative.

Supposing . . . that there were something *whose existence has in itself* an absolute worth, something which, being *an end in itself*, could be a source of definite laws, then in this and this alone would lie the source of a possible categorical imperative, *i.e.*, a practical law.

Now I say: man and generally any rational being *exists* as an end in himself, *not merely as a means* to be arbitrarily used by this or that will, but in all his actions, whether they concern himself or other rational beings, must be always regarded at the same time as an end. All objects of the inclinations have only a conditional worth, for if the inclinations and the wants founded on them did not exist, then their object would be without value. But the inclinations themselves being sources of want, are so far from having an absolute worth for which they should be desired, that on the contrary it must be the universal wish of every rational being to be wholly free from them. Thus the worth of any object which is *to be acquired* by our action is always conditional. Beings whose existence depends not on our will but on nature's, have nevertheless, if they are irrational beings, only a relative value as means, and are therefore called *things*; rational beings, on the contrary, are called *persons*, because their very nature points them out as ends in themselves, that is as something

which must not be used merely as means, and so far therefore restricts freedom of action (and is an object of respect). These, therefore, are not merely subjective ends whose existence has a worth *for us* as an effect of our action, but *objective ends*, that is things whose existence is an end in itself: an end moreover for which no other can be substituted, which they should subsist *merely* as means, for otherwise nothing whatever would possess *absolute worth*; but if all worth were conditioned and therefore contingent, then there would be no supreme practical principle of reason whatever.

If then there is a supreme practical principle or, in respect of the human will, a categorical imperative, it must be one which, being drawn from the conception of that which is necessarily an end for everyone because it is *an end in itself*, constitutes an *objective* principle of will, and can therefore serve as a universal practical law. The foundation of this principle is: *rational nature exists as an end in itself*. Man necessarily conceives in his own existence as being so: so far then this is a *subjective* principle of human actions. But every other rational being regards its existence similarly, just on the same rational principle that holds for me: so that it is at the same time an objective principle, from which as a supreme practical law all laws of the will must be capable of being deduced. Accordingly the practical imperative will be as follows: *So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only.*^l

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13. Kant shows the basic identity of the first and second formulations of the categorical imperative. Those actions that, on the first formulation, cannot be universalized without contradiction (for example, committing suicide or refusing to help the needy) will be seen on the second formulation to be inconsistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself.

The principle: So act in regard to every rational being (thyself and others), that he may always have place in thy maxim as an end in himself,

is accordingly essentially identical with this other: Act upon a maxim which, at the same time, involves its own universal validity for every rational being. For that in using means for every end I should limit my maxim by the condition of its holding good as a law for every subject, this comes to the same thing as that the fundamental principle of all maxims of action must be that the subject of all ends, *i.e.*, the rational being himself, be never employed merely as means, but as the supreme condition restricting the use of all means, that is in every case as an end likewise.^m

14. Having brought to light with logical rigor the implicit presuppositions of the common person's awareness of duty and shown it to be a universal categorical imperative, Kant gives eloquent praise to "pure moral philosophy" and a word of caution to those moralists who would allow reason to be corrupted by empirical considerations.

We see philosophy brought to a critical position, since it has to be firmly fixed, notwithstanding that it has nothing to support it either in heaven or earth. Here it must show its purity as absolute dictator of its own laws, not the herald of those which are whispered to it by an implanted sense or who knows what tutelary nature. Although these may be better than nothing, yet they can never afford principles dictated by reason, which must have their source wholly *a priori* and thence their commanding authority, expecting everything from the supremacy of the law and the due respect for it, nothing from inclination, or else condemning the man to self-contempt and inward abhorrence.

Thus every empirical element is not only quite incapable of being an aid to the principle of morality, but is even highly prejudicial to the purity of morals, for the proper and inestimable worth of an absolutely good will consists just in this, that the principle of action is free from all influence of contingent grounds, which alone experience can furnish. We cannot too much or

too often repeat our warning against this lax and even mean habit of thought which seeks for its principle amongst empirical motives and laws; for human reason in its weariness is glad to rest on this pillow, and in a dream of sweet illusions (in which, instead of Juno, it embraces a cloud) it substitutes for morality a bastard patched up from limbs of various derivation, which looks like anything one chooses to see in it; only not like virtue to one who has once beheld her in her true form.

To behold virtue in her proper form is nothing else but to contemplate morality stripped of all admixture of sensible things and of every spurious ornament of reward or self-love. How much she then eclipses everything else that appears charming to the affections, everyone may readily perceive with the least exertion of his reason, if it be not wholly spoiled for abstraction.ⁿ

Questions

1. How does Kant's ethical theory fit into his general philosophy? What similarities does he find between the problems of scientific knowledge and of morality?
2. Account for Kant's denial of the unqualified goodness of such commonly valued assets as friendship, health, wealth, and the like in terms of his interest in that which is good in itself. What does he regard as the only moral quality that is unqualifiedly good in itself?
3. What is the moral function of *reason* in Kant's philosophy? What is the relationship between reason and happiness?
4. Explain the relationship between *good will* and *duty* in Kant's ethics. Can you think of any alternative ways of relating them?
5. Why does Kant object to using "inclinations" or "feelings" as the basis of morality?
6. What criteria of the morality of actions does Kant establish? How would he evaluate an act of charity performed out of a natural sympathy for the sufferings of the poor?
7. State the "categorical imperative" in any of the forms Kant gives it, and use examples of moral acts to clarify its meaning. What is the basis of the moral law in Kant's system of ethics?
8. What is the role of "motives" in Kant's ethical theory?