

What Is the Supreme Principle of Morality?

If morality means acting from duty, it remains to be shown what duty requires. To know this, for Kant, is to know the supreme principle of morality. What is the supreme principle of morality? Kant's aim in the *Groundwork* is to answer this question.

We can approach Kant's answer by seeing how he connects three big ideas: morality, freedom, and reason. He explains these ideas through a series of contrasts or dualisms. They involve a bit of jargon, but if you notice the parallel among these contrasting terms, you are well on your way to understanding Kant's moral philosophy. Here are the contrasts to keep in mind:

Contrast 1 (morality):

duty v. inclination

Contrast 2 (freedom):

autonomy v. heteronomy

Contrast 3 (reason):

categorical v. hypothetical imperatives

We've already explored the first of these contrasts, between duty and inclination. Only the motive of duty can confer moral worth on an action. Let me see if I can explain the other two.

The second contrast describes two different ways that my will can be determined—autonomously and heteronomously. According to Kant, I'm free only when my will is determined autonomously, governed by a law I give myself. Again, we often think of freedom as being able to do what we want, to pursue our desires unimpeded. But Kant

poses a powerful challenge to this way of thinking about freedom: If you didn't choose those desires freely in the first place, how can you think of yourself as free when you're pursuing them? Kant captures this challenge in this contrast between autonomy and heteronomy.

When my will is determined heteronomously, it is determined externally, from outside of me. But this raises a difficult question: If freedom means something more than following my desires and inclinations, how is it possible? Isn't everything I do motivated by some desire or inclination determined by outside influences?

The answer is far from obvious. Kant observes that "everything in nature works in accordance with laws," such as the laws of natural necessity, the laws of physics, the laws of cause and effect.¹³ This includes us. We are, after all, natural beings. Human beings are not exempt from the laws of nature.

But if we are capable of freedom, we must be capable of acting according to some other kind of law, a law other than the laws of physics. Kant argues that all action is governed by laws of some kind or other. And if our actions were governed solely by the laws of physics, then we would be no different from that billiard ball. So if we're capable of freedom, we must be capable of acting not according to a law that is given or imposed on us, but according to a law we give ourselves. **But where could such a law come from?**

Kant's answer: from reason. We're not only sentient beings, governed by the pleasure and pain delivered by our senses; we are also rational beings, capable of reason. If reason determines my will, then the will becomes the power to choose independent of the dictates of nature or inclination. (Notice that Kant isn't asserting that reason always does govern my will; he's only saying that, insofar as I'm capable of acting freely, according to a law I give myself, then it must be the case that reason can govern my will.)

Of course, Kant isn't the first philosopher to suggest that human beings are capable of reason. But his idea of reason, like his conceptions of freedom and morality, is especially demanding. **For the empiricist philosophers, including the utilitarians, reason is wholly instrumental. It enables us to identify means for the pursuit of certain ends—ends that reason itself does not provide. Thomas Hobbes called reason the "scout for the desires." David Hume called reason the "slave of the passions."**

The utilitarians viewed human beings as capable of reason, but only instrumental reason. Reason's work, for the utilitarians, is not to determine what ends are worth pursuing. Its job is to figure out how to maximize utility by satisfying the desires we happen to have.

Kant rejects this subordinate role for reason. For him, reason is not just the slave of the passions. If that were all reason amounted to, Kant says, we'd be better off with instinct.¹⁴

Kant's idea of reason—of practical reason, the kind involved in morality—is not instrumental reason but “pure practical reason, which legislates a priori, regardless of all empirical ends.”¹⁵

Categorical Versus Hypothetical Imperatives

But how can reason do this? Kant distinguishes two ways that reason can command the will, two different kinds of imperative. One kind of imperative, perhaps the most familiar kind, is a hypothetical imperative. Hypothetical imperatives use instrumental reason: If you want X, then do Y. If you want a good business reputation, then treat your customers honestly.

Kant contrasts hypothetical imperatives, which are always conditional, with a kind of imperative that is unconditional: a categorical imperative. “If the action would be good solely as a means to something else,” Kant writes, “the imperative is hypothetical. If the action is represented as good in itself, and therefore as necessary for a will which of itself accords with reason, then the imperative is categorical.”¹⁶ The term *categorical* may seem like jargon, but it's not that distant from our ordinary use of the term. By “categorical,” Kant means unconditional. So, for example, when a politician issues a categorical denial of an alleged scandal, the denial is not merely emphatic; it's unconditional—without any loophole or exception. Similarly, a categorical duty or categorical right is one that applies regardless of the circumstances.

For Kant, a categorical imperative commands, well, categorically—without reference to or dependence on any further purpose. “It is concerned not with the matter of the action and its presumed results, but with its form, and with the principle from which it follows. And what is essentially good in the action consists in the mental disposition, let the consequences be what they may.” Only a categorical imperative, Kant argues, can qualify as an imperative of morality.¹⁷

The connection among the three parallel contrasts now comes into view. To be free in the sense of autonomous requires that I act not out of a hypothetical imperative but out of a categorical imperative.

This leaves one big question: What *is* the categorical imperative, and what does it command of us? Kant says we can answer this question from the idea of “a practical law that by itself commands absolutely and without any further motives.”¹⁸ We can answer this question from the idea of a law that binds us as rational beings regardless of our particular ends. So what is it?

Kant offers several versions or formulations of the categorical imperative, which he believes all amount to the same thing.

Categorical imperative I: Universalize your maxim

The first version Kant calls the formula of the universal law: “Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”¹⁹ By “maxim,” Kant means a rule or principle that gives the reason for your action. He is saying, in effect, that we should act only on principles that we could universalize without contradiction. To see what Kant means by this admittedly abstract test, let’s consider a concrete moral question: Is it ever right to make a promise you know you won’t be able to keep?

Suppose I am in desperate need of money and so ask you for a loan. I know perfectly well that I won’t be able to pay it back anytime soon. Would it be morally permissible to get the loan by making a false promise to repay the money promptly, a promise I know I can’t keep? Would a false promise be consistent with the categorical imperative? Kant says no, obviously not. The way I can see that the false promise is at odds with the categorical imperative is by trying to universalize the maxim upon which I’m about to act.²⁰

What is the maxim in this case? Something like this: “Whenever someone needs money badly, he should ask for a loan and promise to repay, even though he knows he won’t be able to do so.” If you tried to universalize this maxim and at the same time to act on it, Kant says, you would discover a contradiction: If everybody made false promises when they needed money, nobody would believe such promises. In fact, there would be no such thing as promises; universalizing the false promise would undermine the institution of promise-keeping. But then it would be futile, even irrational, for you to try to get money by promising. This shows that making a false promise is morally wrong, at odds with the categorical imperative.

Some people find this version of Kant’s categorical imperative unpersuasive. The formula of the universal law bears a certain resemblance to the moral bromide grown-ups use to chastise children who cut in line or speak out of turn: “What if everybody did that?” If everyone lied, then no one could rely on anybody’s word, and we’d all be worse off. If this is what Kant is saying, he is making a consequentialist argument after all—rejecting the false promise not in principle, but for its possibly harmful effects or consequences.

No less a thinker than John Stuart Mill leveled this criticism against Kant. But Mill misunderstood Kant’s point. For Kant, seeing whether I could universalize the maxim of my action and continue acting on it is not a way of speculating about possible

consequences. It is a test to see whether my maxim accords with the categorical imperative. A false promise is not morally wrong because, writ large, it would undermine social trust (though it might well do so). It is wrong because, in making it, I privilege my needs and desires (in this case, for money) over everybody else's. The universalizing test points to a powerful moral claim: it's a way of checking to see if the action I am about to undertake puts my interests and special circumstances ahead of everyone else's.

Categorical imperative II: Treat persons as ends

The moral force of the categorical imperative becomes clearer in Kant's second formulation of it, the formula of humanity as an end. Kant introduces the second version of the categorical imperative as follows: We can't base the moral law on any particular interests, purposes, or ends, because then it would be only relative to the person whose ends they were. "But suppose there were something whose existence has in itself an absolute value," as an end in itself. "Then in it, and in it alone, would there be the ground of a possible categorical imperative."²¹

What could possibly have an absolute value, as an end in itself? Kant's answer: humanity. "I say that man, and in general every rational being, exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means for arbitrary use by this or that will."²² This is the fundamental difference, Kant reminds us, between persons and things. Persons are rational beings. They don't just have a relative value, but if anything has, they have an absolute value, an intrinsic value. That is, rational beings have dignity.

This line of reasoning leads Kant to the second formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end."²³ This is the formula of humanity as an end.

Consider again the false promise. The second formulation of the categorical imperative helps us see, from a slightly different angle, why it's wrong. When I promise to repay you the money I hope to borrow, knowing that I won't be able to, I'm manipulating you. I'm using you as a means to my financial solvency, not treating you as an end, worthy of respect.

Now consider the case of suicide. What's interesting to notice is that both murder and suicide are at odds with the categorical imperative, and for the same reason. We often think of murder and suicide as radically different acts, morally speaking. Killing someone else deprives him of his life against his will, while suicide is the choice of the person who

commits it. But Kant's notion of treating humanity as an end puts murder and suicide on the same footing. If I commit murder, I take someone's life for the sake of some interest of my own—robbing a bank, or consolidating my political power, or giving vent to my anger. I use the victim as a means, and fail to respect his or her humanity as an end. This is why murder violates the categorical imperative.

For Kant, suicide violates the categorical imperative in the same way. If I end my life to escape a painful condition, I use myself as a means for the relief of my own suffering. But as Kant reminds us, a person is not a thing, "not something to be used merely as a means." I have no more right to dispose of humanity in my own person than in someone else. For Kant, suicide is wrong for the same reason that murder is wrong. Both treat persons as things, and fail to respect humanity as an end in itself.²⁴

The suicide example brings out a distinctive feature of what Kant considers the duty to respect our fellow human beings. For Kant, self-respect and respect for other persons flow from one and the same principle. The duty of respect is a duty we owe to persons as rational beings, as bearers of humanity. It has nothing to do with who in particular the person may be.

There is a difference between respect and other forms of human attachment. Love, sympathy, solidarity, and fellow feeling are moral sentiments that draw us closer to some people than to others. But the reason we must respect the dignity of persons has nothing to do with anything particular about them. Kantian respect is unlike love. It's unlike sympathy. It's unlike solidarity or fellow feeling. These reasons for caring about other people have to do with who they are in particular. We love our spouses and the members of our family. We feel sympathy for people with whom we can identify. We feel solidarity with our friends and comrades.

But Kantian respect is respect for humanity as such, for a rational capacity that resides, undifferentiated, in all of us. This explains why violating it in my own case is as objectionable as violating it in the case of someone else. It also explains why the Kantian principle of respect lends itself to doctrines of universal human rights. For Kant, justice requires us to uphold the human rights of all persons, regardless of where they live or how well we know them, simply because they are human beings, capable of reason, and therefore worthy of respect.

Morality and Freedom

We can now see the link, as Kant conceives it, between morality and freedom. Acting

morally means acting out of duty—for the sake of the moral law. The moral law consists of a categorical imperative, a principle that requires us to treat persons with respect, as ends in themselves. Only when I act in accordance with the categorical imperative am I acting freely. For whenever I act according to a hypothetical imperative, I act for the sake of some interest or end given outside of me. But in that case, I'm not really free; my will is determined not by me, but by outside forces—by the necessities of my circumstance or by the wants and desires I happen to have.

I can escape the dictates of nature and circumstance only by acting autonomously, according to a law I give myself. Such a law must be unconditioned by my particular wants and desires. So Kant's demanding notions of freedom and morality are connected. Acting freely, that is, autonomously, and acting morally, according to the categorical imperative, are one and the same.

This way of thinking about morality and freedom leads Kant to his devastating critique of utilitarianism. The effort to base morality on some particular interest or desire (such as happiness or utility) was bound to fail. "For what they discovered was never duty, but only the necessity of acting from a certain interest." But any principle based on interest "was bound to be always a conditioned one and could not possibly serve as a moral law."²⁵