

Duty, Will, Obligation, and Imperatives

1. Duty and the Good Will

Recap. Kant suggests that the concept of duty ‘contains that of a good will, though under certain subjective limitations and hindrances’ (397.7–8, GMS I ¶8). The key idea is that in acts from duty the good will reveals itself clearly. So, in order to find the supreme principle of morality, we can try to discover the principles that characterise acts from duty.

‘*Contain*’. Containment in this concept means conceptual entailment.

Analogy: ‘tiger’ entails ‘cat’, i.e. x is a tiger only if x is a cat. (The converse does not hold, for leopards and lions are cats too.) Likewise, if ‘duty’ entails ‘good will’, then x is an act from duty only if x is an act involving good will. (If x is an act from duty, then x is act that involves good will.) There are no acts of duty that do not involve good will.

Indexing. But there are acts involving good will that are *not* acts from duty. This is because maximally perfect rational agents have good will, but since their will is aligned with the objective moral law, they do not act from duty at all. The containment needs to be indexed to our humane situation: hence Kant’s allusion to ‘limitations and hindrances’. So, ‘duty’ entails ‘good will’ *for us*, imperfect rational agents that we are. *For us*, duty entails good will. Since whenever we act from duty, we act through a good will; or, every action done from duty is an action of a good will.¹ (As noted above, this containment does not work the other way, for there is the possibility of acting ‘merely’ in accordance to duty, and this does not show a good will; so to say that ‘good will’ entails ‘duty’ is wrong.)

Duty. Duty is hence the reserve of rationally imperfect beings, whose will needs to be determined by moral laws. For imperfect rational agents rely on *imperatives* that prescribe how they ought to act. In contrast, perfect moral beings will what the moral law demands, and their wills do not have to conform to imperatives. The moral law has not obligatory hold over them, since it *describes* what such agents do, not what they ought to do.

Imperfection. We are beings that are both rational (most of the time) *and* sensuous. We are embodied, and thus have inclinations, appetites, and desires: subjective incentives (*Triebfedern*).

2. Analysis of GMS II, ¶¶12–5

Task. With the above notes in mind, study 412.26–414.11 (GMS II, ¶¶12–5). Think about these questions. (1) Why is the will ‘nothing other than practical reason’? (2) What is ‘necessitation’? (3) What is an ‘imperative’? Check both 413.9–11 (¶13) and 414.8–11 (¶15). (4) Why are imperatives ‘expressed by an

¹ Schönecker, D. and Wood, A. W. (2015). *Immanuel Kant’s ‘Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals’*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press (p. 54).

ought? (5) What is the difference between what is ‘practically good’ and what is (practically) ‘agreeable’?

3. Overview of Imperatives

Subject to a condition: *if*
A wills O, then A ought
to act in this or that way

An action is
commanded not as such,
but as a means to
another end or purpose
(e.g., happiness, health)

IMPERATIVES
command

Core Idea: be rational in your
willing; will the means if you
will the end (cf. 394.22–6)

hypothetically

categorically

An action that is necessary
without reference to
another purpose or end

problematic, technical:
rules of SKILL

pragmatic, assertoric:
counsels of PRUDENCE

apodictic, moral:
laws of FREEDOM

possible

actual

necessary

analytic

synthetic *a priori* (420.12–7)

*End–Means
Principle*: if one
wills a particular
end, then one also
ought to will the
necessary means
(cf. 417.8, 417.30,
419.8)

Why? For perfect rational agents, will and motive coincide, hence any practical statement is thus analytically true. For imperfect rational agents, the will needs to be ‘connected’ with something that is not contained in it, *viz.* the moral law. So, the moral law is *imperative*: it involves an obligatory force; it is *categorical*: necessary independently of subjective inclinations; it is *a priori*: objectivity and necessity; it is *synthetic*: the connection (see Schönecker and Wood, *op. cit.*, pp. 108–9).

Hypothetical imperatives are possible because they are founded in this principle, which is analytic.

How are categorical imperatives possible? See GMS III (cf. 419–20, 429.7–11, 444.35)

