

More on Imperatives

1. Deriving the Categorical Imperative

[1] As imperfect rational beings, our actions are prescribed by imperatives that have obligatory power. Some imperatives are *categorical*: their obligatory power over us is not conditioned by, or related to, certain ends.

[2] While categorical imperatives *are* possible (and perhaps actual), Kant asks *how* they are possible. But he does not yet ‘deduce’ the CI in *GMS II*.

[3] Instead, he “will first try to see whether perhaps the mere concept of a categorical imperative does not also provide us with a formula, containing the proposition which alone can be a categorical imperative” (420.18–21).

[4] Hypothetical imperatives: we know what it commands *only if* we know the intended end or condition (420.24–6).

[5] Categorical imperatives: we know ‘immediately what it contains’ (420.27). We do not *infer* what they command from specific ends or purposes. This is because such imperatives are unconditional: they contain merely the command that the maxim conforms to the law, and since this law too is not further conditioned (by ends or purposes), there remains only the ‘universality of a law as such’ (421.2).

[6] This yields a fairly abstract and formal first formulation of the CI:

FUL Act only in accordance with maxims of which you can at the same time will that they become universal laws. (see 421.6–8)

As imperfect rational beings, we *ought* to act on maxims that have a claim to being universal moral laws. Our maxims are thus conditioned by the universal nomological character, and the possibility that we can coherently think and will certain laws.

[7] In order to emphasise the strict and universal validity of moral laws, Kant suggests the second formulation of the CI:

FLN Act in such a way that you can will your maxims as universal laws of nature (421.18–21)

We ought to consider ourselves to be part of nature that contains rational beings like us who act with natural necessity and without exception in line with those maxims (that could be thought and willed to be laws).

[8] The core thought: if I cannot allow anyone to choose actions in the way that I now do, then how could I allow myself to choose in the way I do? I would consider my actions as *exceptions*—but what warrants my being an exception? If I cannot will that my maxim becomes a general law (of nature), then I treat myself (*das liebe Selbst*, the dear self; 407.25) more leniently or permissively than others.

2. Examples and Tests

[9] Perfects duties command specific actions or omissions. Imperfect duties command certain ends but leave the means open. Kant combines these with duties to others and duties to oneself, and thus gets four examples.

[10] Kant suggests two tests for the maxims involved (where the CC concerns perfect duties and the CW concerns imperfect duties):

CC *Contradiction in conception*: the maxim cannot be thought without contradiction as a universal law of nature. It is inconceivable.

CW *Contradiction in willing*: (while perhaps the maxim is conceivable) it is impossible to will the maxim to be a universal law of nature.

[11] The maxims and laws in the examples:¹

M1 In the long run, if my life threatens more ill than it promises agreeableness, then, from self-love, I make it my principle to shorten that life.

L1 It is a universal law of nature that all beings from self-love make it their principle to shorten their lives if in the long term that life threatens more ill than it promises agreeableness.

M2 If I am in financial trouble, I shall borrow money that I promise to pay back even if I have no intention of keeping that promise.

L2 It is a universal law of nature that everyone who is in (financial) trouble makes a promise with the aim of escaping these troubles and the intention of not keeping the promise.

M3 I always prefer pleasure over making the effort to expand and improve my natural talents.

L3 It is a universal law of nature that everyone prefers gratification and pleasure over efforts to expand and improve one's natural talents.

M4 I do not harm others but I do not contribute anything to their well-being or help them when they are in need.

L4 It is a universal law of nature that while nobody harms others, nobody contributes to anyone else's well-being or helps them when they are in need.

1 After Schönecker D. and Wood, A. W. (2015). *Immanuel Kant's 'Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals'*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press (pp. 131ff.).

