

Duties, Maxims, and the Synthetic Apriori

1. Duties

421.23 Note. In the second part of *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), Kant does indeed provide more information about kinds of duties. Duties differ in terms of the seat of their obligating (coercive) power. Duties of *virtue* (*Tugendpflichten*) motivate us to act from the idea of duty. This is the point Kant aims to develop in *GMS*: such duties are moral (e.g., being kind to others, perfect one's own talents). They bind us independently of external coercion, solely from 'the moral law within us', for two reasons: they have no corresponding right (so a violation does not justify punishment), and as disposition (that we foster) they are not susceptible to be externally compelled (cf. Locke's *Letter on Tolerance*). This does not hold for Duties of *Right*, the second main class of duties (e.g., contractual obligations or violations of the right to not being harmed).

The four examples in *GMS* (which Kant thinks are exhaustive and complete) have a further distinction. *Perfect* (*vollkommene*) duties are 'strict and narrow (unrelenting)' (424.10–1)—they admit 'no exception in favour of inclination' (421.23 Note). They prescribe or prohibit specific actions; and some of them may well be coerced. In contrast, *imperfect* duties prescribe or prohibit specific *ends* or maxims. They leave open how the end is achieved, and thus they could not be enforceable. To take benevolence: the CI suggests we ought not to be indifferent to the plight of others (cf. 423.31–5), it does not prescribe how to fulfil this obligation (e.g., donating to charity, volunteering).

	Perfect Duties	Imperfect Duties
Duties to oneself	Preserve one's own life	Develop one's own talents
Duties to others	Not making a false promise	Benevolence

2. The CI and Maxims

420.28 Note. Laws are objective rules (e.g., *CPR* A126) that are also necessary (e.g., *CPR* A 113), and universal (e.g., *GMS* 416.20). There are laws of nature, according to which everything *does* happen (as an object in nature), and laws of freedom, according to which everything *ought* to happen (recall *GMS* 387–8). The latter are relevant for morality as a normative (non-empirical) endeavour.

In contrast, maxims are 'subjective principles' of action, or practical principles, which bind just me, but not everyone. For Kant, all actions *in fact* ground in a maxim: insofar as they characterise an individual's motivations, the commitments for doing something, and so reveal what is being valued (as an end), they define a person's character (see 393.5–13). Maxims are *context dependent, focused on action, and related to ends* (or 'matter', i.e. what the action is about): if/whenever ... I will ... in order to

The CI is often interpreted as a decision procedure for moral evaluation: (1) formulate your maxim *M*; (2) universalise *M*: ‘Necessarily, if/whenever ... everyone will ... in order to ...; (3) apply the two consistency tests (424.1–10); (4) derive moral value: if *M* can be universalised, actions driven by *M* are morally permitted.¹

So, we *ought* to act according to universalisable maxims; but the CI itself does not (seem to) prescribe or prohibit specific actions. It is a significant meta-ethical *formal* constraint, which demands that moral reasons are ‘supreme’ (cf. 392.14), law-like in character, and define the proper object of respect: persons, or humanity as such. But this adds a new dimension: the hint of a theory of the good, and hence a moral relevance that is not found in FUL and FLN. This seems to be the point about the move to FH at 429.10–2.

3. Synthetic a priori Propositions

420.14 *Note*. The remarks about the CI being a synthetic *a priori* statement are somewhat cryptic. Kant says more in the Third Section. Approach by exclusion: the CI is not *analytic*, because in contrast to a hypothetical imperative, the action is *not* contained in the concept of a particular end. So the CI is *synthetic*. But it is not *a posteriori*, because the obligation expressed by the CI is not derived from experience; and neither is it contingent (on it). So, the CI is both synthetic and *a priori*: it is possible only if it is unrelated to experience, thus independent of specific ends that commanded actions are supposed to bring about (or realise).

Kant ties *aprioricity* to necessity, and *syntheticity* to a ‘connection’ between will and action that is not grounded in some *conceptual* entailment (as in the case of the hypothetical imperatives).

		Semantic: how true?	
		analytic: in virtue of the meaning of concepts (intension)	synthetic: in virtue of how the world is
Epistemic: how known?	a priori: independently of experience		
	a posteriori: through experience		

1 Timmons, M. (2006). The Categorical Imperative and Universalizability (GMS, 421–424). In C. Horn and D. Schönecker (eds.), *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (158–99). Berlin: De Gruyter (p. 162).

