

KANT'S MORAL MAXIMS

THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant attempted to universalize his metaethics, arguing that all rational beings would adhere to moral maxims or duties. These maxims are also known as the *categorical imperative*. The first two maxims that follow are given as they are printed in S.E. Stumpf's *Philosophy: History and Problems* and the third maxim is given as printed in James Rachels' *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*:

“Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst [that is, can] at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” [Kant] expresses the imperative of duty in an alternate way, namely, ‘Act as if the maxim of thy action were to become a universal law of nature.’”

“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.”

“So act as though you were through your maxims a law-making member of a kingdom of ends.”

Activity

Translate each maxim into contemporary prose—everyday language that you might use with your friends or family.

Background

Kant argued that the maxims are categorical imperatives because they are not derived from the variety of human experience. As he writes in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*:

“There may be noted further that unless we want to deny to the concept of morality all truth and all reference to a possible object, we cannot but admit that the moral law is of such widespread significance that it must hold not merely for men but for all rational beings generally, and that it must be valid not merely under contingent conditions and with exceptions but must be absolutely necessary.”

Similar to Hume (see page 173 of your textbook), Kant argued that you cannot derive an *ought* from an *is*. Instead, one has to go back, prior to all human experience, to synthetic *a priori* principles that *all rational beings* would readily adhere to. (Regarding ideas about *a priori* principles, read pages 255 and 271 of your textbook.)

MORAL DUTY AND EDUCATION

(Read pages 187-189 of your textbook in preparation for this section.)

Kant developed a *deontological* theory of morality, in that it focuses on the “duties” (*deontos*) one has to perform as a rational member of civic society: acting out of moral obligation and intention for the common, civic good, and practically pursuing what is universally “right.” The highest virtue and greatest good, in a Kantian sense, is to act rationally, intentionally, and autonomously with a sense of duty toward others:



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directing one's *free will* (which he assumed to be a necessary precondition of morality) with concern not to exploit others. But this kind of rational disposition does not occur naturally (like our faculties for sight or hearing): it must be cultivated. Kant thus speaks in his *Lectures on Pedagogy* of the need for moral education:

“Practical, or moral, education is that by which man is to be so formed that he can live as a freely acting being. (All that which has reference to freedom is called ‘practical’). It is the elucidation towards personality, the education of a free being who can maintain himself and become a member of society, but who can also have an inner worth peculiar to himself.”

Kant argued that his categorical imperative applied “to men and all other rational beings... .” However, like Rousseau, Kant excluded women from this class. As Kant writes in *Lectures on Pedagogy*, “The fair sex has understanding, just the same as the masculine; it is only a *beautiful* understanding; ours should be a *deep* understanding, which is an expression having a meaning that is identical with the sublime... .”

Consider: Kant speaks earlier of the “education of a free being” while also excluding women from his categorical imperative. Thus today we look back on the Kantian notion of freedom and rightly ask: “Freedom for whom?”

Questions:

1. What is the *golden rule*? Does it apply to the three maxims written on page 1 of this handout? Explain.
2. In his book *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche spoke mockingly of Kant and his attempt to arrive at a rational foundation for morality. Indeed, Nietzsche suggested that no philosopher has been able to supply a rational foundation for morality.
 - a) If Nietzsche was correct that there can be no rational foundation for morality, does his critique lead to moral relativism, where “anything goes”? Explain.
 - b) Express your view: Is there a rational foundation for morality, or is there no such foundation?
3. Taking into account Nietzsche’s criticism of Kant, as well as Kant’s exclusion of women from his categorical imperative, can we accept any of Kant’s ideas as valid? Alternatively, can we entertain what might be called a *modus vivendi* (a road that gets us there) approach to Kant’s categorical imperative? In other words, should we take an approach by which we need not accept the absoluteness of the maxims and yet see the benefit of acting as though they were universally applicable? Explain your view.

