

**PRELIMINARIES.** The distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives is slippery. This is in large part due to the ongoing vagueness of the very notion of imperative, as well as to Kant's choice of terminology. Taken at face value, Kant's remarks are obscure and misleading, and there is no one neat way to make sense of them all. What I present here is a version of the currently dominant view in the Kantian literature, but with quirks.

Generally 'imperative' is used as a synonym for 'command'. Kant distinguishes between hypothetical and categorical imperatives. The distinction echoes a standard distinction in logic. Hypothetical statements are expressed in the form of conditional statements: 'If  $P$ , then  $Q$ '. Categorical statements are expressed as simply  $P$ . Unfortunately, Kant's distinction is certainly different.

**MAXIMS.** To understand the distinction properly, let us ignore Kant's presentation for a moment and think about 'maxims', rules of actions we have adopted. Examples include:

- (i) Exercise every day!
- (ii) Diversify your investments!
- (iii) Study hard for the exams!

One observation is that, grammatically, they are formulated with the sentences in imperative mood: they command me to do something. Second, they are general, in the sense that they apply to me on relevantly similar occasions (there can be no maxim 'Exercise on the 1 January 2019!'). Third, though general, they come attached with implicit conditions of performance. For example:

Exercise every day, unless you are sick!  
 If you have any substantial investments, diversify them!  
 If you have any exams, study hard for them!

(3-1)

Fourthly, the maxims can also be equipped with conditions indicating the *purpose* for which they are adopted:

If you want to stay healthy, exercise every day!  
 If you want to be rich, diversify your investments!  
 If you want to be successful, study hard for the exams!

(3-2)

So we could say that maxims have *conditions of application* and *conditions of justification*. Specifying the first set of conditions is necessary for knowing when to follow the maxims. Specifying the second set of conditions is necessary for knowing why to adopt them.

*Remark 1.* It is an interesting further question whether maxims should be consciously adopted and consciously pursued policies. If they are such, then too many people have very few maxims, if any. Suppose you ask me to lend you some money. I might perform this action of lending without having any prior principle (e.g., 'Help your friends who were nice to you in the past'). And even if there were an occasion in my life where I formulated such maxim for myself, I might perform the same action without trying to conform my action to such a principle if I had any.

Looking at the conditions of justification, we see that the action (behaviour) commanded by the maxim is a means for achieving a certain purpose. The means-end relationship is *causal*: exercising every day causes you to remain healthy etc.

Now Kant thinks that it is possible to adopt a maxim which we could justify without a reference to a purpose, or in any event, without a reference to a purpose that stands in a causal relation to the means (this proviso will be explained later on). The maxim itself, the concepts it contains, will be sufficient for justifying it.

We can already give examples based on Kant's earlier discussion. Thus a prudent shopkeeper has the maxim of the following sort:

*Maxim* Do not overcharge your customers!

*Conditions of application* When there are customers, when you are not on the verge of bankruptcy, when there is no hyperinflation etc.

*Conditions of justification* If you want to remain prosperous.

You see that the conditions of application and justification are in fact related. Knowing why I adopt the maxim in the first place (what the purpose is) dictates when to follow the maxim.

Consider now a moral shopkeeper. We imagine that his situation may be as follows:

*Maxim* Do not overcharge your customers!

*Conditions of application* When there are customers, when they buy your goods etc.

*Conditions of justification* If overcharging is wrong.

In adopting his maxim, the moral shopkeeper is concerned solely with the question whether the behaviour is wrong, and not whether it contributes to an independently posited goal. However, the justification is still elusive, since we do not know what constitutes right and wrong.

**HYPOTHETICAL IMPERATIVE.** In Kant's terminology, imperatives are distinguished from maxims in that the latter are subjectively necessary while imperatives are objectively necessary. Among other things this might mean that imperatives are simply *universalised* maxims.

So one might think that, e.g., categorical imperatives will include principles like: 'Everyone has to tell the truth.' This seems to satisfy the description at 414. But in a crucial passage at 421 we discover that there is only one categorical imperative! So it cannot be that every maxim can be universalised into an imperative. Indeed, as we saw, at 413 imperatives are defined as *conceptions* of an objective principle.

This is a mess, but the conclusion we are driven to is not unexpected. We already know from earlier discussion that motives guiding our moral behaviour are supposed to be discovered by reason alone. No amount of hard thinking will allow us to discover maxims, universalised or not. They are empirical. What we can do is to examine whether these maxims satisfy certain abstract *conditions*, a priori and formal. These conditions are given by imperatives. So we have to think of imperatives as second-order 'tests' applied to first-order principles (maxims). Again begin with hypothetical imperatives:

*HI* 'You ought to perform *X*, if: [you will to achieve *Y*] and [performing *X* is a means for achieving *Y*] and [if you fully will the effect, then you fully will the means].'

*Remark 2.* We only deal with 'imperatives of skill', since the maxims above targeted a possible purpose. When they target the 'actual' purpose of happiness, then this becomes the 'imperative of prudence' altogether. We ignore this distinction here.

Imperatives, then, are abstract practical principles exemplified in our maxims.