

## KANT: CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE (FH, FA)

**THE END IN CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE.** Kant has already made clear that an action of good will must be free from the influence of inclination. It must be performed solely on the basis of reason. But every action, Kant seems to assume, has a purpose. However, we have just argued that any purpose that is merely desired—merely driven by an incentive—cannot be governed by the categorical imperative. So now the search is on for the end that the person can achieve by acting on the law of reason.

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Here we should emphasise: human *reason*, and not *human* reason. We cannot derive the moral end from a special, even though praiseworthy, property of human beings. The imperative should apply to all rational beings, and on this ground, also to humans.

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*Example 1 (Altruism).* You may be able to show that the all properly constituted humans, on at least some occasions, have the tendency to act out of concern for the well-being of other people (or animals, or even plants). But we cannot single this property out and say: to act morally is to act altruistically, i.e. to care for other people at your own expense.

Philosophy, Kant says, should be an independent ruler of its domain and have the authority to issue laws herself.

*Remark 2.* To describe the philosophical authority Kant uses the word ‘*Selbsterhalterin*’, here paraphrased as ‘sustainer of its own laws’. This is the appellation given in Kant’s time to the Russian Empress Catherine II. The Russian word is ‘*samoderzhets*’ which itself is a translation of the Byzantine term ‘*autokrator*’ which was a translation of the Roman term ‘emperor’ and ‘dictator’. Currently we call Putin and Xi ‘autocrats’ to avoid using the more sinister term ‘dictator’—though these are the same concepts, really. That Kant does not hesitate to call the philosophy by the title given to Catherine, a great rival of his native Prussia (and given the devastation wreaked by Russia just few years earlier), is a touching sign of his cosmopolitanism.

**IMPERATIVE’S COMMAND.** Now suppose we have shown that the duty can only be expressed in a categorical imperative of the form FLN. We have not yet shown that this very imperative has the force of command for the rational will. So the ‘question’ Kant asks is: supposing that there is a categorical imperative, formulated per above, how can we show that it is indeed a necessary law for every rational being? To show that, the imperative must be ‘connected’ a priori with the concept of rational being. I think Kant reasons here by analogy with causal or psychological laws. A flower is subject to the law of blooming (itself derived from a more general law, of course), because its representation (=formulation) contains the concept of flower:

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If  $x$  is a flower, then  $x$  must bloom in spring. (5-1)

*Remark 3.* By having ‘must’ in its formulation the law ‘commands’ the flower to bloom. This is different from many modern approaches to natural laws which are conceived as generalisations from experience and do not in any sense ‘command’.

We are looking for a similar formulation of imperative where the concept of rational being explicitly appears. Of course the imperative, unlike a causal law, must be justified a priori and must make no reference to the empirical characteristics of people, such as their incentives.

Since the moral law (expressed in the categorical imperative) is unconditionally valid, the end must also be good intrinsically, in itself. What could this intrinsically good end be? Kant rejects three candidates. One is objects of desire (*Neigung*, inclination). They are good only for a particular purpose—the satisfaction of desire. Desire itself cannot be good intrinsically, since it carries no value once it is satisfied. Finally, animals are equally devoid of intrinsic goodness, as they do not invoke reverence.

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The intrinsically good end is found in humanity. The latter is not to be understood biologically: humans are not intrinsically good by virtue of belonging to a certain species. It is rather the rational nature in actual humans that constitutes that intrinsically good end.

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As such, it has dignity, rather than price, and it is able to inspire reverence. What, however, possesses all these qualities is not a whole man, so to speak, but only the rational nature in that man.

**RESPECT.** What are the properties of rational nature that marks it out from things and makes it worthy of respect? It cannot be just the mere presence of a brain (or nervous system). Elsewhere in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant suggests that its essential characteristic is the ability of *setting ends for itself*. Are animals, even fairly primitive biological organisms, not capable of setting ends for themselves? Some argue that they are, and that therefore they do not qualify as mere things. But perhaps animals do not *themselves* set the ends—inclinations do that for them.

Some other commentators locate the essential property of rational nature elsewhere. What makes it worthy of respect is the ability to act morally. What does this ability consist in? It seems that it should consist in the freedom from inclination and thus in the very fundamental ability to act freely. Only under such assumption, moreover, actions can be attributed to a *person*, rather than to an aggregate of psychic, physiological, biological forces acting inside him.

On the second view, animals or retarded people are denied rationality in this technical sense. Thus they are to be classified as things. Should we, therefore, treat them as we please? Perhaps not. Perhaps all that has been established is that we have no duties to *them*. Yet actions towards them may still be constrained by the duties towards ourselves.

*Question 4.* Consider works of art. Are they to be respected as ends in themselves, or could they be used as we please? What about various property items?

**FORMULA OF HUMANITY.** After establishing that humanity is an end in itself, Kant proceeds to derive the formula of categorical imperative. The dense argument can be reconstructed as having the following steps:

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- (1) I represent myself as end in itself.
- (2) Therefore, this representation is always a subjective ground of action (i.e. it is presupposed in any of my maxims).
- (3) But other human beings also represent themselves as ends in themselves.
- (4) Therefore, this must serve as an objective ground of action.
- (5) Consequently, the principle of will must be such that I ought to always act towards myself, as well as towards others, as an end in itself.

We arrive at another formulation of the categorical imperative:

*FH* 'Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in other persons, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.'

**NOT MERELY AS MEANS.** It is essential for Kant to include in FH the provision 'merely'. Of course we often do use people as means. There should be nothing wrong with this, as long as we also use them as ends. But what does this mean?

To use people as ends is to respect them. This does not mean to shower them with signs of respect, or to form a positive view of them. Presumably it means to respect their rational nature, and that in turn means to respect the ends set by that nature. So on the first approximation, we say that FH urges us, in our interactions with persons, not to ignore the ends set by these persons.

*Question 5.* Examine the four examples which Kant uses to illustrate the application of FH.

**FORMULA OF AUTONOMY.** Kant now gives the formula of autonomy which is supposed to combine FH and FLN:

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*FA* 'Act only in such a way that the maxim governing your conduct is at the same time comprehended as universal law in your volition.'

Let us ignore how exactly the combination works. Instead let us notice the contrast with FLN. FLN involves a kind of universalisation which keeps the subject constant. In asking whether my maxim conforms to FLN, I am asking whether I could will that maxim to be a universal law. Another kind of universalisation occurs when I ask whether my maxim could be endorsed as universal law by every rational being.

This feature has the following consequence. You might ask: does FA actually promote amorality? The moral requirements it approves of are self-imposed! But this is a misconstrual: the subject legislates not merely for himself, but for all other agents (considered as ends in themselves).

*Question 6.* Should self-interested actions be compatible with FA?

**THE KINGDOM OF ENDS.** The kingdom of ends (KE) is a (harmonious) union of ends in themselves (i.e. of rational creatures). Here one idea is that to think of yourself as an autonomous agent is to think of yourself as legislating universally for other agents (that are ends in themselves).

But how can there be any such union if each citizen of the KE has his private goals? Could it be that the citizens have no private goals in the first place? Well, no, because then there would be nothing to unify. The insistence on harmonious unity should assume that the citizens of the KE have their private goals. The answer is, rather, that there is a normative requirement here. That is, whatever private goals the citizens have, they should be harmonised in conformity to FA.

**DIGNITY AND PRICE.** Here Kant claims that morality and rational nature (as far as it is capable of moral acts) have intrinsic value (dignity). As such, they are irreplaceable.

A question whether there is anything else besides morality and humanity that has intrinsic value. For example, works of art may be thought to be irreplaceable. But Kant flatly denies that. He does so presumably on the grounds that the value of art resides in the appreciation by observers, and that the same appreciation can be produced by other items (such as clever copies).

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