

Hypothetical imperatives: Foot

HYPOTHETICAL AND CATEGORICAL. How to distinguish between two kinds of imperatives? Perhaps we say, first, that categorical imperatives are about what ought to be done, hypothetical imperatives are about what would be good to do. There are distinctions to make within the class of the hypothetical imperatives. If we think about ‘good’, then some goods, i.e. things that are ‘good’, may be a matter of a passing, arbitrary, replaceable inclination—as when I choose one cafeteria over another. Some goods are, however, a matter of a long-term commitment (‘devotion’ is Foot’s preferred term). The choice of your career or your partner would fall in this category. In the case of long-term projects it is sometimes awkward to track current desires. When we are committed to our marriage, for example, it is not as though the desire to be in this marriage always accompanies us (often quite the opposite!). Nevertheless it is possible to still use desires in an extended sense. In any event: hypothetical imperatives seem to involve desires, whether of one man or many, in the way in which categorical imperatives do not. 157 158 159

Another difference may be this. When issuing an hypothetical imperative (more exactly, adopting a maxim having the form of a hypothetical imperative) we stand ready to withdraw it. If we find that the person whom we address does not in fact want what we thought he did, or if the way we suggest for satisfying the desire is not good, then we withdraw the imperative. And this is different with categorical imperatives: no matter what the person’s desires are, he *ought to* follow the moral rule. This is the special necessity attached to categorical imperatives. If the person happens not to care about fishing, we will not tell him to fish. If, however, he does not care about morality, he still ought to follow it. 159 160 171

ETIQUETTE. But is there actually a proof for this inescapability of moral judgements? Using Bernard Williams’ metaphor, if a moral community is a kingdom of ends (as in the *Groundwork*), why can’t the subjects emigrate?

Now it is easy to find a rule-governed activity which is not sensitive to the people’s current desires. One such activity is etiquette. Even if I don’t feel like wearing a tie to a dinner party, the rule still applies to me. I can’t resist it by saying: 160

(12-1) Ties are expensive and inconvenient, so it is my habit not to wear them.

Whatever my preferences are, the rule still applies to me. It is, therefore, not clear what difference remains between morality and etiquette.

REASON-GIVING FORCE. The difference may be in the way morality and etiquette relate to reasons. For you might have an easy response to (12-1): 161

(12-2) Ties are obligatory at the parties—so far as you care about etiquette. But so what? I don’t care about etiquette at all!

Following etiquette is not based on the reasons given by etiquette itself. Would morality not be different in this regard? That is, can one adopt a so-what attitude to it as well:

(12-3) Cheating is morally wrong—but so what? I don’t care one way or another.

A typical Kantian rejoinder is to accuse this speaker of inconsistency and irrationality. Foot argues that the speaker may well be accused of villainy, but not of irrationality. A person is irrational when he deliberately works to frustrate his own goals. But this does not seem to be the case here.

There is perhaps another response available too. Even if the speaker of (12-3) is accused of irrationality, he may again retort ‘so what?’ Even if an immoral action should violate principles of (ideal) rationality, the speaker will insist that his commitment is to his own happiness. Experience shows that immoral actions occasionally increase happiness, and this, in his eyes, is their only justification. A moral theorist will then have to square the circle: he will to prove that morality and practical rationality (which now come down to the same thing) converge on happiness. Plato and Hobbes tried to do just that, but with no success.

ADVICE AND COMMAND. We can concede that moral judgements are normative. But it seems the same should be said of the judgements of etiquette. Normativity alone will not help us distinguish between morality and etiquette. Both command; neither limit itself to giving advice. 162

Yet people still insist that morality is endowed with special ‘stringency’. Because of this stringency we think of etiquette as containing hypothetical imperatives (speaking loosely), and we think of morality as containing categorical imperatives. Same for the ‘necessity’ that morality is supposed to possess. But what is the source of this stringency and this necessity? 162 163

If we think honestly and without prejudice about the matter, then we realise that the alleged stringency and necessity are simply a kind of feeling we have about morality. This feeling is inculcated in us by education. In our society at least, violations of etiquette are considered milder compared to moral violations. That is how children are raised too. And that is how we have come to perceive morality and its difference from etiquette. 163

DUTY FOR DUTY'S SAKE. It will be protested that the argument above ignored one central feature of morality, certainly the one central for Kant. Moral maxims should be adopted, and moral actions performed, for the sake of duty, and for no other end. This is different from etiquette, where it would be mad for someone to say that he observes its conventions for their own sake, or for the sake of etiquette as a whole. 164

But why to believe that moral motivation should be restricted to the duty-for-duty's-sake motivation? Kant's own reason seems to be his psychological hedonism. He assumed that, if a person does not act for the sake of duty, then he acts on the basis of one of his desires. All such desires point to pleasure and happiness. But moral motivation cannot be of this kind. So, in order to be motivated morally, the person must act for the sake of duty alone. 165

In this kind of argument we ignore other possibilities. A person may help others simply because he wants to help *them*, and not in order to derive some pleasure for himself. Other virtues are consistent with these various motives. And now, why to think that these motives (caring for other people, for truth or liberty) are any less moral than acting for duty's sake? 165

Therefore, it should seem that a recognisably moral system would admit many hypothetical imperatives, and that the alignment of morality with the categorical imperative is misleading. A moral man would be committed to moral ends, committed to them with devotion—but not because they happen to satisfy some rule or because such a commitment has the form of 'duty for duty's sake'. 166

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