

# Introduction to Philosophy (PHIL104)

## Handout 9

### Kant II

**MAXIMS AND IMPERATIVES.** Generally ‘imperative’ is used as a synonym for ‘command’. Kant distinguishes between hypothetical and categorical imperatives. The distinction is based on their logical form. Hypothetical statements are expressed in the form of conditional statements: ‘If *P*, then *Q*’. Categorical statements are expressed as simply *P*.

However, it seems that there is no neat way to present Kant’s discussion. Here is one—not so neat—way diverging from Kant’s terminology and order of presentation. We begin with *maxims*, rules of actions we have adopted. They must be general in the sense that they must apply to *us* on relevantly similar occasions. Some maxims will have hypothetical form, other will be categorical. Among hypothetical maxims we can distinguish maxims of skill and maxims of prudence. Let us pick up some examples to make this clear.

**HM-S** ‘You should break the eggs, if you want to cook an omelette’, ‘You should diversify your investments, if you want to protect your money’, ‘You should play strong players, if you want to become an expert in chess.’

**HM-P** ‘Since you want to increase your happiness, you should protect your health.’ This seems to be the only example (see below).

**CM** ‘You should tell the truth’, ‘You should help others in need.’

HM-S is called by Kant ‘problematic’, since the goal specified in the condition is not always shared by different agents. It can be a merely possible goal. HM-P is a special case of HM-S. It is called ‘assertoric’, since the goal specified in its condition, viz. happiness, is necessarily shared by all rational creatures. It ‘asserts’ a fact about this necessarily *actual* goal. CM ignores any goal, possible or actual.

*Question 1.* Would the maxim ‘If you want to protect your health, you ought to will to protect your heart’ be a HM-S or HM-P?

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.

**HYPOTHETICAL IMPERATIVES.** Now, once we have this classification of maxims, we move on to imperatives. They 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* categorical 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 539 [414]. But in a crucial passage at 542 [421] we discover that there is only one categorical imperative! So the proposal (that there are as many imperatives as there are maxims) must be wrong. Indeed: at 539 [413] imperatives are defined as *conceptions* of an objective principle.

This is a mess, but the conclusion we are driven to is not odd or unexpected. We already know from chapter I that imperatives 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-S** ‘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].’

**HI-P** ‘You ought to perform *X*, if: [you will to achieve happiness] and [performing *X* is a means for achieving happiness] and [if you fully will happiness, then you fully will the means for happiness].’

Imperatives, then, are abstract practical principles exemplified in our maxims. When we look at them, we see that they are analytic (page 540 [417]). Kant insists that HI-P is not analytic, because the concept of happiness is obscure.

*Remark 2.* This attribution of analyticity is obscure. Imperatives are not judgements or propositions.

**CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE.** In the categorical imperative we are supposed to abstract from conditions. So it must have categorical form. Kant gives several formulations of the imperative that is supposed to underlie categorical maxims.

**FUL** ‘Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time [rationally] will it should become a universal law.’

Closely aligned with FUL is another formula:

**FLN** ‘Act *as if* the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.’

The task of CI is to provide a test for the maxims we adopt in our behaviour. CI specifies a necessary condition that a morally actionable maxim should satisfy. That is: a maxim is moral only if it satisfies CI.

YSB