

# PHI 202 | Kant's central argument in Groundwork I and II

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## Unconditional value

Ethical theorising has to have a starting point. Kant thinks that moral laws must be discoverable *a priori*: through rational reflection alone. For this to be possible, they must be universal and unconditional. Thus, Kant is looking for something that has unconditional value.

Kant's candidate is *the good will*: the motivation to do the right thing because it is the right thing.

First, Kant argues that the value of the good will is not conditional on anything else. For instance, it is not conditional on the consequences of one's actions. To illustrate that, we can imagine Ann and Bob who perform the same action from good will, but Ann's action ends up benefiting people whereas Bob's action harms people. According to Kant, they are equally valuable.

Second, Kant considers a range of popular candidates for final value (such as happiness, courage, determination, and intelligence) and argues that they have value only if they are accompanied by a good will. For instance, a scientist's intelligence is not finally valuable if it is used for evil ends.

Third, Kant considers another candidate for final value: actions which *conform with duty*, regardless of the motivation. He claims that an action can conform with duty even if it is not done from good will (= *from duty*). He identifies two other possible kinds of motivation for action. First, one can act *from immediate inclination*. For instance, a sympathetic person might help others (only) because they enjoy helping people. Second, one can act *from indirect inclination*. For instance, a merchant may refrain from overcharging a customer (only) because this gives him a good reputation which helps his business. Kant argues that neither of these actions has unconditional value, even if they conform with duty.

Thus, Kant concludes, the good will is the only thing that has unconditional value. It is the key to morality. If we pin down what is involved in acting from good will, we will identify the moral laws.

## What is involved in acting from good will

To determine what is involved in acting from good will, we need to first look at the psychology behind our actions. According to Kant, humans are presented with various *incentives*. They include things like our desires, thoughts about what is good for us, and thoughts about what is moral. Crucially, according to Kant, humans are *free to decide* which incentives to act on. When you decide to act on an incentive, you *make it your maxim*. A maxim expresses an agent's intended action and the reason for performing that action: "I will do act A for reason R".

We can thus see that acting from good will involves acting on a particular kind of maxim: "I will do act A because it is my duty". This maxim has the form of a law. Recall that Kant's starting point is that moral laws must be discoverable *a priori*, and so must be universal: the same for everyone. Thus, acting from good will involves acting on a maxim that has the form of a universal law.

The final piece of the puzzle is this. Recall that Kant thinks that an action can be in conformity with duty even if it is not performed from good will. However, he claims, for an action to be in conformity with duty, it *must be possible* to perform it from good will. And acting from good will involves acting on a maxim that has the form of a universal law. This gives us

*The Categorical Imperative*: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law" (4:402).

## The laws of morality and rationality

Kant wants to figure out not just how to act *morally*, but more generally how to act *rationally*. Moral laws, he thinks, are among "the principles of practical reason" but they are not the only ones.

One way to think about these principles of rationality is that they would regulate the actions of perfectly rational beings in the same way that laws of nature regulate the movements of inanimate objects. However, humans are not perfectly rational beings. According to Kant, we are free to choose which maxims to act on. And, in doing so, we can succumb to temptations or make errors. Thus, principles of rationality do not tell us *how we actually act* but rather *how we should act*.

Kant calls such principles "imperatives". They come in two kinds. A *hypothetical imperative* tells you that if you have some end, then you should take the means to that end. For instance, if you want to be healthy, then you should exercise. It has a conditional form: if... then. A *categorical imperative* simply tell you that you should do something, period. There are no conditions attached.

These distinctions will be relevant to Kant's further arguments. For our purposes in this course, they simply help clarify what Kant has in mind when he talks about the Categorical Imperative.

## How to apply the Categorical Imperative

Thus far, Kant has only shown that *if* there was a moral law, *then* it would be the Categorical Imperative. He leaves the task of proving that there *is* a moral law until the end; we won't discuss it. But we can still ask with Kant: if the Categorical Imperative were true, how would we apply it?<sup>1</sup>

Before we answer this question, note that the Categorical Imperative is only a *constraint*. That is, it can only say which actions you should not perform. It cannot, on its own, tell you which action to perform when there are multiple available actions which conform with duty. (That said, there may be *other* principles of rationality which further limit available actions until you end up with one.)

The application procedure can be understood as follows.

(1) *Formulate the maxim*. The basic form of the maxim is "I will do act A for reason R". For instance: "I will make a false promise because I need to get some ready cash".

(2) *Formulate the corresponding universal law (of rationality)*. It would be: "Everyone who needs some ready cash makes a false promise".

(3) *Imagine a world in which this universal law holds and you choose to act on your maxim*. Can we make sense of such world? Or is there a contradiction of one of the following kinds?

(i) *Logical contradiction in conception*. It might be impossible to imagine a world in which this universal law holds. Perhaps making promises would be impossible in a world in which everyone who needs some ready cash "makes a false promise". So such world is incoherent.

(ii) *Practical contradiction in conception*. It might be irrational to act on the maxim if the universal law holds. Perhaps making promises would be inefficacious in a world in which everyone who needs some ready cash makes a false promise. So it could not be a law of rationality.

(iii) *Contradiction in willing*. It might impossible to consistently will the universal law and other things that rationality tells us to will.

<sup>1</sup> Note that Kant offers three different formulations of the Categorical Imperative, which he controversially takes to be equivalent: the Formula of Universal Law, the Formula of the Law of Nature, and the Formula of Humanity. We discuss only the first one.