

Lecture Notes 2 : The Formula of Universal Law

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Groundwork 2

Imperatives

An imperative is a

'representation of an objective principle, insofar as it is necessitating for a will'.
(*Groundwork* 4: 413)

Species of imperative

(1) *Hypothetical imperatives* (HI): 'represent the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else that one wills'

whereas

(2) *Categorical imperatives* (CI): represent 'an action as objectively necessary of itself, without reference to another end'.

Why categorical imperatives?

Contra Hume, who identified reason with its instrumental part:

'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.' (*Treatise*, §2.3.3)

A rough-and-ready argument based on premises from 'common rational moral cognition':

(3) Duty implies the possibility of acting from duty.

(4) Acting from duty requires acting from inclination-independent motives (i.e. respect for law).

(5) Inclination-independent action is action done from recognition of the necessity of that action, and not from some further (inclination-dependent) end.

∴ (6) Duty presupposes the existence of categorical imperatives.

Sub-species of imperative

Technical imperatives: if you will x, then you ought to will the means to bring about x *regardless of any inclinations* telling against x.

Prudential imperatives: pertaining to happiness and its pursuit.

Moral imperatives: these, and only these, are categorical.

The Formula of Universal Law (FUL)

Kant's attempted deduction of the FUL from the CI:

'[CI] contains, beyond the law, only the necessity that the maxim be in conformity with this law, while the law contains no condition to which it would be limited, nothing is left with which the maxim of the action is to conform, but the universality of a law as such; and this conformity alone is what the imperative properly represents as necessary. There is, therefore, only a single categorical imperative, and it is [first statement of the FUL]' (G 4: 420)

Here's a reconstruction of the argument:

- (7) The CI implies the necessity that the relevant maxim of action should conform to objective law.
- (8) Objective law contains no conditions to limit it (other than objective law itself).
- ∴ (9) The relevant maxim conforms with the universality of law as such, and it alone.
- ∴ (10) There is only a single CI, and it requires that we act only on maxims whose content we can will that it become universal law.

The first formulation of the supreme principle of morality is therefore:

FUL: act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become universal law.

The inferences to (9) and (10) are invalid.

The Formula of the Law of Nature (FLN)

FLN: act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature.

Kant's four illustrations.

The FUL as a permissibility test

Contradiction in conception (CC)

- (11) 'when I believe myself to be in need of money I shall borrow money and promise to repay it, even though I know that this will never happen'. (G 4: 422)

Kant contends that this maxim 'must necessarily contradict itself' in thought.

Contradiction in the will (CW)

Idea here is not that a given maxim cannot be *thought* as universal law, but rather that it cannot be so *willed*. Case of refusing to help the needy:

- (12) in light of the hardship of others, say: 'what is it to me? Let each be as happy as heaven wills; I shall take nothing from him; only I do not care to contribute anything to his welfare or to his assistance in need!' (G 4: 423)

(12) passes CC, but not CW.

Is the FUL necessary for permissibility?

- (13) 'I will play tennis on Sunday, when everyone else is in church' (Barbara Herman), or 'I will give daily more than the average donation to charity' (Derek Parfit), or 'I will buy a car, and never sell one' (Onora O'Neill)

Such maxims involve morally permissible actions. But they are not universalizable.

Is the FUL sufficient for permissibility?

Consider:

- (14) 'I shall make a false promise to H.J. Paton III on Thursday the 25th of October 2012, at 12pm'

Why does (17) fail to pass CC, or CW?

Study questions

How does Kant propose to deduce the FUL?

'Kant rejects teleological accounts of action.' Discuss.

Suggested Reading

Groundwork, sections 1 and 2.

Schneewind, J. (1992) 'Autonomy, Obligation, and Virtue: An Overview of Kant's Moral Philosophy', in Guyer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, CUP, pp. 309-341.

O'Neill (1990), chapter 5.