

The categorical imperative

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“ A categorical imperative would be one which represented an action as objectively necessary in itself, without reference to any other purpose” (Kant, brainyquote. com). Immanuel Kant along with some other great philosophers was a central figure in modern philosophy. His ethical theory provides an account of general duties and a justification of moral motivation. During Kant’s life span from 1724-1804 he studied many different topics in philosophy but his main study was on the Categorical Imperative. Along with the Categorical Imperative he also studied maxims and the principle of universalizability.

Kant’s theory is very hard to interpret and can be complex and difficult at times. The Supreme Principle of Morality also known as the Categorical Imperative is Kant’s main focus in his philosophic theory. The Categorical Imperative can also be described as an unconditional command. There is only one Categorical Imperative but there are three different formulations that Kant has created. The first formulation of the Categorical Imperative as quoted by Kant is, “ Act only according to the maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

In other words this formulation of the Categorical Imperative can be said that when each individual determines that everyone, including themselves, will always act the same way to the same general rule. In order for a person to be a moral and good person they will have to follow this formulation of the Categorical Imperative. This is the most confusing but important part of Kant’s ethical theory. In the first formulation Kant stated, “ Act only according to that maxim...” What is a maxim? Defined by Kant a maxim is, “ a subjective principle of violation.”

In other words a maxim can be defined as a policy statement or a personal rule that contains a condition and an action. There are many different types of maxims that can be created but according to Kant some of them can be determined as a type of duty, either being a perfect duty or an imperfect duty. A perfect duty is a maxim that has absolute prohibitions and a good example out of the textbook is, “ When I believe myself to be in need of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, although I know that I can never do so” (pg. 206).

This is a good example of a perfect duty because it is an absolute prohibition where the person is lying in order to get what they want. An imperfect duty is a relative prohibition and a good example out of the textbook is, “ Let everybody be as happy as heaven wills or as he can make himself; but I have no desire to contribute anything to his well-being or to his assistance when in need” (pg. 206). This is a good example of an imperfect duty because it’s a relative exhortation when somebody isn’t willing to share his knowledge or talents with anybody else.

According to Kant a person should only operate on those maxims that function like that of the law of nature. In order to only operate on the maxims that function like the law of nature we have to somehow prove which maxims can be created into a universal law of nature. In order to determine whether a maxim should be created into a universal law we have to look towards the principle of universalizability. This principle lets us get a better look at a maxim if it were to be a universal law in order to determine if it truly follows the law of nature.

Referring back to the example of the perfect duty, “ When I believe myself to be in need of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, although I know that I can never do so” (pg. 206). If this were to be considered a universal law it would be self-defeating because then everybody would be following this rule so nobody would lend each other money because they would all know that they aren’t going to get it back. According to this principle this type of maxim cannot be created into a universal law of nature.

Returning back to the example of an imperfect duty, “ Let everybody be as happy as heaven wills or as he can make himself; I shall take nothing from him nor even envy him; but I have no desire to contribute anything to his well-being or to his assistance when in need” (pg. 206). If this maxim were to be considered a universal law everybody would stay as they are keeping the same talents that they possess and learn nothing new because nobody would be willing to contribute their own talents to each other’s well-being.

Based on this principle this type of maxim cannot be willed as a universal law of nature because at some point we all must depend on or seek help from other to maintain a steady pattern of life. Kant’s multiple formulations of the Categorical Imperative are the main part of his ethical theory but his first formulation is the most important out of the three. Again as stated by Kant his first formulation is, “ Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

Kant has directed this formulation towards any rational human beings who attempt to understand it and follow it. There are many different kinds of maxims that people could attempt to follow but not all of them can become a

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universal law of nature. Kant's principle of universalizability summarizes his first formulation of the categorical imperative tying together the meaning of maxims and whether it follows the categorical imperative. The Categorical Imperative is found to be very hard for most people to interpret and understand it.