



The concept of *Categorical Imperative* represents one of the most important discoveries of Reason in the field of Ethics and morality. Kant, as a researcher on human Reason, becomes with it the founder of modern *deontology* and establishes a *milestone* for almost the next three hundred years of research on moral philosophy. Kant distinguishes between some different principles on morality, before announcing his universal form of ethical law: there are simple "*practical principles*", which are purely subjective, like maxims or general rules (i.e. "I must retaliate for every wrong to myself"); or which already are "*imperatives*" and have therefore universal validity since they state a general rule as a valid one for *everyone, everywhere at any time*.

These imperatives were divided by Kant into two main species: the *hypothetical imperatives*, which follow after a stated premise, and are therefore "*conditioned*" (i.e. If you want to succeed you have got to learn a lot"), and that unique and universal form of *Categorical Imperative* (hence a single one, instead of many...) that doesn't *draw* at all any consequence from a previous *deed* or condition and is therefore "*unconditioned*".

It states the moral command *for the sake* of the moral command itself, regardless of any other "material" purpose (wealth, success, beauty, money, spiritual development, and the like...). Here it is, in its *three different* and mutually *interlaced* formulations as presented by Kant. They can be also viewed as a *sylogistic formalism*:

- 1) *Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*
- 2) *Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end. Therefore ...*
- 3) *... every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxim always a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends.*

The *valuable form of the Categorical Imperative* can be found in its *universalism*: in fact it holds not only for everyone because it simply aims to. On the contrary: no one can *restrain* from accepting its highest level of rationality. We must conclude for its compelling universality (just make a practical proof: try to steal an object to others and consider then whether you formally applied the Imperative and how you *disrupted* it!).

A *second important validation* of the Imperative is the complete *lack of connection with "empirical", egoistic impulses*. The *deterministic realm of our individuality* with all its *alluring* desires (wealth, beauty, power...see above) cannot be the source of our behavior in following the Imperative, which is completely "*boundless*": it doesn't have any foundation on whatever *empirical or "esthetical" entanglement* of any sort which would have to do with any *egoistic form of immediate pleasure*, advantage, reward and satisfaction related to our physical body or psychical identity. Esthetical, *Esthetics* mean for Kant immediate connection with physical sensation. So, being esthetically limited means not being able to make the *leap* to the universal boundless formalism of the *ethical law*: if you want to be rich you cannot *pursue* the general rule of the Imperative without contradiction.

We cannot avoid following the imperative: it shows complete freedom from any "*interest*" in our empirical world which is made of desires, pleasures, *hatred*, nature and objects. Only the duty for the duty itself matters. No other conditions for our action can be taken in account for the sake of the *moral dignity* of every human individual: sharing all together this dignity means to become part of that "*realm of ends*", the idea of a community based upon the Imperative, where human are treated as ends themselves and not as means to other empirical ends. By doing so, Kant lets arise a fundamental distinction: *moral behavior* arises when we act only for the sake of the Imperative. What everyone sees is what we did and wanted to enact. I save a drowning person risking my life for the sake of his life and for no other purposes. Everyone perceives it. *Legal behavior*, instead, does postpone the Imperative and *seizes* the opportunities: I save the drowning person because he owes me money: everyone may be cheering me, yet without knowing that I *slyly* acted for the sake of my *due* money.

***Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)** Born in Königsberg, at that time former capital of East Prussia, now known as Kaliningrad and part of the former Soviet Union. He is perhaps the most important philosopher of all times and the intellectual icon of the Western philosophy. With his three main works (The Critique of Pure Reason 1781, The Critique of Practical Reason 1787 and the Critique of Judgment 1790) he investigated the structure of Reason itself and suggested that traditional Metaphysics would be abandoned in favor of logic and of empirical proof. He built up his philosophy on the heritage of the English Empirical stance as presented by Hume, Locke and in science by Newton. Metaphysical thinking had to be definitely rejected and the boundaries of knowledge were to be fixed by Kant only within the realm of empirical possibility and observation. Yet in the Critique of Practical Reason he turned upside down this former statement: in the realm of Morality and Ethics the determinism of the empirical world is not only useless but even dangerous to the development of mankind. Ethical thinking becomes hence the realm of metaphysical thinking, since we do have to turn ourselves to the idea of moral duty as conveyed by the concept of Categorical Imperative and have to be worth of human dignity because of our mutual reciprocity.

Notes for the Lecture

Case of *conditional and hypothetic imperatives*:

- if I wish to quench my thirst, I must drink something or;
- if I wish to acquire knowledge I must learn.

A categorical imperative, on the other hand, denotes an absolute, unconditional requirement that asserts its authority in all circumstances, both required and justified as an end in itself. It is best known in its first formulation:

- "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law

The concept of **the categorical imperative** is a [syllogism](#).

1. The first premise is that a person acts morally if his or her conduct would, without condition, be the "right" conduct for any person in similar circumstances (the "First Maxim").
2. The second premise is that conduct is "right" if it treats others as ends in themselves and not as means to an end (the "Second Maxim").
3. The conclusion is that a person acts morally when he or she acts as if his or her conduct was establishing a universal law governing others in similar circumstances (the "Third Maxim").

Freedom and autonomy

Free will

Determinism

Moral autonomy

Moral eteronomy

Eternal clash between Reason and egoistic impulses

Morality-Legality

The *capsizal* of the two critics: empiricism in the Pure Reason and freedom from Empiricism in the Practical Reason.