

Groundwork: Second Section (4:431–437)

Immanuel Kant

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Ak. 4:431-437 (required)

This principle of humanity and of every rational nature as such, *as an end in itself* (which is the supreme limiting ^{4:431} condition of the freedom of actions of every human being) is not borrowed from experience, first, because of its universality, as it aims at all rational beings as such, and about that no experience is sufficient to determine anything; secondly, because in it humanity is represented not as an end of human beings (subjectively), i.e. as an object that by itself one actually makes one's end, but as an objective end that, whatever ends we may have, as a law is to constitute the supreme limiting condition of all subjective ends, and hence must arise from pure reason. For the ground of all practical legislation lies *objectively in the rule* and the form of universality, which (according to the first principle) makes it capable of being a law (or perhaps a law of nature), *subjectively*, however, *in the end*; the subject of all ends, however, is every rational being, as an end in itself (according to the second principle): from this now follows the third practical principle of the will, as the supreme condition of its harmony with universal practical reason, the idea of *the will of every rational being as a universally legislating will*.^z

According to this principle, all maxims are rejected that are not consistent with the will's own universal legislation. Thus the will is not just subject to the law, but subject in such a way that it must also be viewed *as self-legislating*,^a and just on account of this as subject to the law (of which it can consider itself the author^b) in the first place.

The imperatives according to the previous mode of representation – namely of actions in conformity with law generally similar to a *natural order*, or of the universal *precedence of the end*^c of rational beings in themselves – did exclude from their commanding repute any admixture of interest, as an incentive, precisely because they were represented as categorical; but they were only *assumed* to be categorical because such an assumption was necessary if one wanted to explicate the concept of duty. But that there are practical propositions that command categorically could not of itself be proved, just as little as this can generally be done at present, in this section; one thing, however, could yet have been done, namely: that the dissociation from all interest in willing from duty, as the specific mark distinguishing categorical from hypothetical imperatives, be indicated in the imperative itself, by means of ^{4:432} some determination that it contains, and this is done in the present third formula of the principle, namely the idea of the will of every rational being, as a *universally legislating will*.

For when we think of such a will, then, even though a will *that stands under laws* may still be bound to this law by means of some interest, yet a will that is itself the supreme legislator cannot possibly, as such, depend on any interest; for such a dependent will would itself require yet another law to limit the interest of its self-love to the condition of a validity to be a universal law.

Thus the *principle* of every human will as *a will universally legislating through all its maxims*,* if it is otherwise correct, would be very *well fitted* to be the categorical imperative, in that, precisely for the sake of the idea of universal legislation, it *is founded on no interest* and can thus alone, among all possible imperatives, be *unconditional*; or better still, by converting the proposition, if there is a categorical imperative (i.e. a law for every will of a rational being), then it can only command to do everything from the maxim of one's will as one that could at the same time have as its object itself as universally legislating; for only then is the practical principle, and the imperative the will obeys, unconditional, because it can have no interest whatsoever at its foundation.

Now, if we look back on all the efforts that have ever been undertaken to detect the principle of morality to this day, it is no wonder why one and all they had to fail. One saw the human being bound to laws by his duty, but it did not occur to anyone that he is subject *only to his own* and yet *universal legislation*, and that he is only obligated to act in conformity with his own will which is, however, universally legislating according to its natural end.^d For if one thought of him just as subject to a law (whichever it may be), it had to carry with it ^{4:433} some interest as stimulation or constraint, because it did not as a law arise from *his* will, which instead was necessitated by *something else*, in conformity with a law, to act in a certain way. Because of this entirely necessary conclusion, however, all the labor of finding a supreme ground of duty was irretrievably lost. For one never got duty, but the necessity of an action from a certain interest, be it one's own interest or that of another. But then the imperative always had to be conditional, and could not be fit to be a moral command at all. I shall therefore call this principle the principle^e of the **autonomy** of the will, in opposition to every other, which I accordingly count as **heteronomy**.

The concept of every rational being that must consider itself as universally legislating through all the maxims of its will, so as to judge itself and its actions from this point of view, leads to a very fruitful concept attached to it, namely that *of a kingdom f of ends*.

By a *kingdom*, however, I understand the systematic union of several rational beings through common laws.^g Now, since laws determine ends according to their universal validity, it is possible – if one abstracts from the personal differences among rational beings, and likewise from all content of their private ends – to conceive a whole of all ends (of rational beings as ends in themselves, as well as the ends of its own that each of them may set for itself) in systematic connection, i.e. a kingdom of ends, which is possible according to the above principles.

For all rational beings stand under the *law* that each of them is to treat itself and all others *never merely as a means*, but always *at the same time as an end in itself*. But by this there arises a systematic union of rational beings through common objective laws, i.e. a kingdom, which – because what these laws have as their purpose is precisely the reference of these beings to one another, as ends and means – can be called a kingdom of ends (of course only an ideal).

A rational being, however, belongs to the kingdom of ends as a *member* if it is universally legislating in it, but also itself subject to these laws. It belongs to it *as its head* if as legislating it is not subject to the will of another.

4:434 A rational being must always consider itself as legislating in a kingdom of ends possible through freedom of the will, whether as a member, or as its head. It cannot, however, occupy the position of the latter merely by the maxims of its will, but only if it is a completely independent being, without need or limitation of its capacities adequate to the will.

Morality thus consists in referring all action to the legislation by which alone a kingdom of ends is possible. This legislation must, however, be found in every rational being itself, and be able to arise from its will, the principle of which is thus: to do no action on a maxim other than in such a way, that it would be consistent with it that it be a universal law, and thus only in such a way *that the will could through its maxim consider itself as at the same time universally legislating*. Now, if maxims are not already by their nature in agreement with this objective principle of rational beings, as universally legislating, the necessity of an action according to this principle is called practical necessitation, i.e. *duty*. Duty does not apply to the head in the kingdom of ends, but it does to every member of it, and indeed to all in equal measure.

The practical necessity of acting according to this principle, i.e. duty, does not at all rest on feelings, impulses, or inclinations, but merely on the relation of rational beings to one another, in which the will of a rational being must always at the same time be considered as *legislating*, since it could not otherwise be thought as an *end in itself*. Reason thus refers every maxim of the will as universally legislating to every other will, and also to every action towards oneself, and it does so not for the sake of any other practical motivating ground or future advantage, but from the idea of the *dignity* of a rational being that obeys no law other than that which at the same time it itself gives.

In the kingdom of ends everything has either a **price**, or a **dignity**. What has a price can be replaced with something else, as its *equivalent*; whereas what is elevated above any price, and hence allows of no equivalent, has a dignity.

What refers to general human inclinations and needs has a *market price*; what, even without presupposing a need, conforms with a certain taste, i.e. a delight in the 4:435 mere purposeless play of the powers of our mind, has a *fancy price*; but what constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself does not merely have a relative worth, i.e. a price, but an inner worth, i.e. *dignity*.

Now, morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself; because it is possible only by this to be a legislating member in the kingdom of ends. Thus morality and humanity, in so far as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity. Skill and diligence in work have a market price; wit, lively imagination, and humor have a fancy price; by contrast, fidelity in promising and benevolence from principles (not from instinct) have an inner worth. If these are lacking, neither nature nor art contains anything that they could put in their place; for their worth does not consist in the effects that arise from them, in the advantage and utility they provide, but in the dispositions – i.e. the maxims of the will – which in this way readily reveal themselves in actions, even if the result were not to favor them. Also, these actions need no recommendation from any subjective proclivity or taste to look upon them with immediate favor and delight, from any immediate propensity or feeling for them; they represent the will that performs them as the object of an immediate respect, for which nothing but reason is required to *impose* them upon the will, not to *coax* them out of it, which latter would be a contradiction in the

case of duties anyway. This estimation thus lets us recognize the worth of such a way of thinking as dignity, and puts it infinitely above any price, with which it cannot be balanced or compared at all without, as it were, violating its sanctity.

And what is it, then, that entitles a morally good disposition or virtue to make such high claims? It is nothing less than the *share* it obtains for a rational being *in universal legislation*, by which it makes it fit to be a member of a possible kingdom of ends, which it was already destined to be by its own nature, as an end in itself and precisely in virtue of this as legislating in the kingdom of ends, as free with regard to all laws of nature, obeying only those that it itself gives and according to which its maxims can belong to a universal legislation (to which he i at the same time 4:436 subjects himself). For nothing has any worth other than that which the law determines for it. But precisely because of this, the legislation that determines all worth must itself have a dignity, i.e. unconditional, incomparable worth, for which the word *respect* alone makes a befitting expression of the estimation a rational being is to give of it. *Autonomy* is thus the ground of the dignity of a human and of every rational nature.

The above three ways of representing the principle of morality are fundamentally only so many formulae of the selfsame law, one of which j of itself unites the other two within it. However, there is yet a dissimilarity among them, which is indeed subjectively rather than objectively practical, namely to bring an idea of reason closer to intuition (according to a certain analogy) and thereby to feeling. For all maxims have

- 1) a *form*, which consists in universality, and then the formula of the moral imperative is expressed as follows: that maxims must be chosen as if they were to hold as universal laws of nature;
- 2) a *matter*, namely an end, and then the formula says: that a rational being, as an end according to its nature, and hence as an end in itself, must serve for every maxim as the limiting condition of all merely relative and arbitrary ends;
- 3) a *complete determination* of all maxims by that formula, namely: that all maxims from one's own legislation ought to harmonize into a possible kingdom of ends as a kingdom of nature.* Here the progression takes place as through the categories of the *unity* of the form of the will (its universality), the *plurality* of the matter (of objects, i.e. of ends), and the *allness* or totality of the system of these. But in moral *judging* it is better always to proceed by the strict method, and make the foundation the universal formula k of the categorical imperative: *act according to the maxim that can make itself at the same time 4:437 a universal law*. If, however, one wants at the same time to obtain *access* for the moral law, it is very useful to lead one and the same action through the said three concepts and thereby, as far as can be done, bring it closer to intuition.

Notes

z *eines allgemein gesetzgebenden Willens*. Here, and in the sequel, a more literal translation replaces Gregor's "a will giving universal laws." As to "lawgiving" vs. "legislation," Gregor is right that "legislation" and "legislator" naturally refer to the sphere of positive law, which Kant did not have in mind in the *Groundwork*; but then, so do *Gesetzgebung* and *Gesetzgeber* in German. Kant is clearly availing himself of a political metaphor.

a More literal than Gregor's "as giving the law to itself," and again preferable. As she notes, *selbstgesetzgebend* might be taken to refer to legislation *by* the self as well as legislation *to* the self. In her translation, the former is implied but the emphasis clearly rests on the latter. However, Kant's argument in general, and at 4:440 in particular, would seem to

emphasize the former. What is important is that the will must be viewed *as itself legislating*. The present translation preserves the ambiguity and thus leaves the interpretative question open.

b in the sense of “originator”

c *Zwecksvorzuges*, a tricky word, which Kant uses only once, at this point in the *Groundwork*; human beings as ends take universal precedence in the order of ends, and the ends of human beings deserve universal preferential treatment.

* I can be exempted from citing examples to illustrate this principle, since those that first illustrated the categorical imperative and its formula can all serve just that purpose here.

d *dem Naturzwecke nach*

e *diesen Grundsatz das Prinzip*, second edition; the first edition has merely “this principle” (*dieses Prinzip*), which does not make sense

f or “realm,” “commonwealth”

g in the sense of “communal” or “shared”

h *Disposition*; to be distinguished from an agent’s *Gesinnung* (“disposition”), a term used above and there equated with an agent’s maxims, i.e. subjective principles of action. For **Kant**, a *disposition* is a habitual proclivity to act in a certain way, as distinguished from one’s (natural) temperament, see *Anthropology* 7:286.13 .

i Kant slips back into using the masculine pronoun associated with “human being” (*der Mensch*) rather than the neuter of “being” (*das Wesen*). This is not uncommon. There is no need to change the text.

j Gregor, among others, translates the text to the effect that *each* of the three formulae must contain the other two within itself, but that is not what Kant is saying. *One* of the variants (the third of the formulations mentioned here) contains within it the other two (the first and the second).

* Teleology considers nature as a kingdom of ends, moral science a possible kingdom of ends as a kingdom of nature. There the kingdom of ends is a theoretical idea for explaining what exists. Here it is a practical idea for the sake of bringing about – in conformity with precisely this idea – what does not exist but can become actual by means of our behavior.

k or perhaps “general formula”