

Groundwork: First and Second Sections (through 4:424)

Immanuel Kant

October 7. Required and recommended passages are marked by section headings. Book pages 17-36; Akademie 4:401-424.

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First section, remainder (recommended)

4:402 But what kind of law can that possibly be, the representation of which – even without regard for the effect expected from it – must determine the will for it to be called good absolutely and without limitation? Since I have robbed the will of all impulses that could arise for it from following some particular law, nothing remains but as such the universal conformity of actions with law, which alone is to serve the will as its principle, i.e. I ought never to proceed except in such a way *that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law*. Here, then, mere conformity with law as such (not founded on any law determined with a view to certain actions) is what serves the will as its principle, and must so serve it if duty is not to be as such an empty delusion and a chimerical concept; common human reason in its practical judging is actually in perfect agreement with this, and always has the envisaged principle before its eyes.

Let the question be, e.g., may I not, when I am in trouble, make a promise with the intention not to keep it? Here I easily discern the different meanings the question can have: whether it is prudent, or whether it conforms with duty to make a false promise. The former can no doubt quite often take place. I do see very well that it is not enough to extricate myself from the present predicament by means of this subterfuge, but that it requires careful deliberation whether this lie may not later give rise to much greater inconvenience for me than those from which I am now liberating myself; and – since with all my supposed *cunning* the consequences cannot be so easily foreseen that trust once lost might not be far more disadvantageous to me than any ill that I now mean to avoid – whether one might not act *more prudently* in this matter by proceeding according to a universal maxim, and by making it one's habit to promise nothing except with the intention of keeping it. But here it soon becomes clear to me that such a maxim will still only be founded on the dreaded consequences. Now, to be truthful from duty is something quite different from being truthful from dread of adverse consequences; as in the first case, the concept of the action in itself already contains a law for me, whereas in the second I must first look around elsewhere to see what effects on me this might involve. For if I deviate from the principle of duty, this is quite certainly evil; but if I defect from my maxim of 4:403 prudence, that can sometimes be very advantageous to me, though it is of course safer to adhere to it. However, to instruct myself in the very quickest and yet undeceptive way with regard to responding to this problem – whether a lying promise conforms with duty – I ask myself: would I actually be content that my maxim (to extricate myself from a

predicament by means of an untruthful promise) should hold as a universal law (for myself as well as for others), and would I be able to say to myself: everyone may make an untruthful promise when he finds himself in a predicament from which he can extricate himself in no other way? Then I soon become aware that I could indeed will the lie, but by no means a universal law to lie; for according to such a law there would actually be no promise at all, since it would be futile to pretend my will to others with regard to my future actions, who would not believe this pretense; or, if they rashly did so, would pay me back in like coin, and hence my maxim, as soon as it were made a universal law, would have to destroy itself.

I do not, therefore, need any wide-ranging acuteness to see what I have to do for my willing to be morally good. Inexperienced with regard to the course of the world, incapable of bracing myself for whatever might come to pass in it, I just ask myself: can you also will that your maxim become a universal law? If not, then it must be rejected, and that not because of some disadvantage to you, or to others, that might result, but because it cannot fit as a principle into a possible universal legislation, for which reason extracts from me immediate respect; and although I do not yet see on what it is founded (which the philosopher may investigate), at least I do understand this much: that it is an estimation of a worth that far outweighs any worth of what is extolled by inclination, and that the necessity of my actions from *pure* respect for the practical law is that which constitutes duty, to which every other motivating ground must give way, because it is the condition of a will good *in itself*, whose worth surpasses everything.

Thus, then, we have progressed in the moral cognition of common human reason to reach its principle, which admittedly it does not think of as separated in this way in a universal form, but yet always actually has before its eyes and uses as the standard of its judging. 4:404 Here it would be easy to show how, with this compass in hand, it is very well informed in all cases that occur, to distinguish what is good, what is evil, what conforms with duty or is contrary to it, if – without in the least teaching it anything new – one only, as Socrates did, makes it aware of its own principle; and that there is thus no need of science and philosophy to know what one has to do in order to be honest and good, indeed even to be wise and virtuous.⁹ It should actually have been possible to presume all along that acquaintance with what it is incumbent upon everyone to do, and hence also to know, would be the affair of every human being, even the commonest. Here one cannot without admiration observe the great advantage the practical capacity to judge has over the theoretical in common human understanding. In the latter, when common reason dares to depart from the laws of experience and the perceptions of the senses, it falls into nothing but sundry incomprehensibilities and internal contradictions, or at least into a chaos of uncertainty, obscurity, and instability. But in practical matters the power of judging first begins to show itself to advantage just when common understanding excludes all sensuous incentives from practical laws. Then it even becomes subtle, whether it seeks to engage in legalistic quibbles^a with its conscience, or with other claims referring to what is to be called right, or seeks sincerely to determine the worth of actions for its own instruction; and, what is most important, in the latter case it stands just as good a chance of hitting the mark as a philosopher can ever expect; indeed it is almost more sure in this than even the latter, because he can have no other principle, but can easily confuse his judgment with a host of alien and irrelevant considerations and deflect it from the straight course. Accordingly, would it not be more advisable, in moral things, to leave it with the judgment of common reason, and at most to bring on philosophy to present the system of morals more completely and accessibly, and likewise its rules in a form more convenient for use (and still more

for disputation), but not to let it lead common human understanding away from its fortunate simplicity for practical purposes, and by means of philosophy to put it on a new route of investigation and instruction?

Innocence is a glorious thing, but then again it is ^{4:405} very sad that it is so hard to preserve and so easily seduced. Because of this even wisdom – which probably consists more in behavior than in knowledge elsewhere – yet needs science too, not in order to learn from it, but to obtain access and durability for its prescription. The human being feels within himself a powerful counterweight to all the commands of duty – which reason represents to him as so worthy of the highest respect – in his needs and inclinations, the entire satisfaction of which he sums up under the name of happiness. Now reason issues its prescriptions unrelentingly, yet without promising anything to the inclinations, and hence, as it were, with reproach and disrespect for those claims, which are so vehement and yet seem so reasonable^b (and will not be eliminated by any command). But from this there arises a *natural dialectic*, i.e. a propensity to rationalize against those strict laws of duty, and to cast doubt on their validity, or at least their purity and strictness and, where possible, to make them better suited to our wishes and inclinations, i.e. fundamentally to corrupt them and deprive them of their entire dignity, something that in the end even common practical reason cannot endorse.

Thus *common human reason* is impelled to leave its sphere not by some need of speculation (which never comes over it as long as it is content to be mere sound reason), but rather on practical grounds, and to take a step into the field of a *practical philosophy*, in order to receive there intelligence and distinct instruction regarding the source of this principle and its correct determination in contrast with maxims based on need and inclination, so that it may escape from the predicament caused by mutual claims, and not run the risk of being deprived of all genuine moral principles because of the ambiguity into which it easily falls. Thus also in practical common reason, when it cultivates itself, a *dialectic* inadvertently unfolds that necessitates it to seek help in philosophy, just as happens to it in its theoretical use, and the one is therefore just as unlikely as the other to find rest anywhere but in a complete critique of our reason.

^a *sehikanieren*, to obstruct the claims of conscience, like a pettifogger in a law court

^b or “fair”; “equitable” in a juridical context

* A *maxim* is the subjective principle of willing; the objective principle (i.e. the one that would also subjectively serve all rational beings as the practical principle if reason had complete control over the desiderative faculty) is the practical *law*.

* I might be accused of using the word *respect* just to seek refuge in an obscure feeling, instead of giving distinct information about the matter in question by means of a concept of reason. But even though respect is a feeling, it is not one *received* by influence, but one *self-wrought* by a rational concept and therefore specifically different from all feelings of the former kind, which come down to inclination or fear. What I recognize immediately as a law for myself I recognize with respect, which signifies merely the consciousness of the *subordination* of my will to a law, without mediation of other influences on my sense. The immediate determination of the will by the law and the consciousness of this is called *respect*, so that it is viewed as the *effect* of the law on the subject and not as its *cause*. Respect is

actually the representation of a worth that infringes on my self-love. Thus it is something that is considered an object neither of inclination, nor of fear, even though it is at the same time somewhat analogous to both. The *object* of respect is therefore solely the *law*, the one that we impose upon *ourselves* and yet as in itself necessary. As a law we are subject to it, without consulting self-love; as imposed upon us by ourselves, it is yet a consequence of our will, and in the first regard it has an analogy with fear, in the second with inclination. All respect for a person is actually only respect for the law (of righteousness etc.) of which he gives us the example. Because we also view expanding our talents as our duty, we represent a person of talents also, as it were, as the *example of a law* (to become like him in this by practice)^x and this is what constitutes our respect. All moral *interest*, so called, consists solely in *respect* for the law.

Second section, through Ak. 4:412 (recommended)

4:406 Second section Transition from popular moral philosophy to the metaphysics of morals

If so far we have drawn our concept of duty from the common use of our practical reason, it is by no means to be inferred from this that we have treated it as an experiential concept. Rather, if we attend to our experience of the behavior of human beings we meet frequent and, as we ourselves concede, just complaints that no reliable example can be cited of the disposition *c* to act from pure duty; that, though much may be done that *conforms* with what *duty* commands, still it is always doubtful whether it is actually done *from duty* and thus has a moral worth. That is why there have been philosophers in every age who have absolutely denied the actuality of this disposition in human actions, and attributed everything to a more or less refined self-love, without however calling into doubt the correctness of the concept of morality because of this; rather, with intimate regret they made mention of the frailty and impurity of a human nature that is indeed noble enough to take an idea so worthy of respect as its prescription, but at the same time too weak to follow it, and that uses reason, which should serve it for legislation, only to take care of the interest of inclinations, whether singly or, at most, in their greatest compatibility with one another.

4:407 In fact, it is absolutely impossible by means of experience to make out with complete certainty a single case in which the maxim of an action that otherwise conforms with duty did rest solely on moral grounds and on the representation of one's duty. For at times it is indeed the case that with the acutest self-examination we find nothing whatsoever that – besides the moral ground of duty – could have been powerful enough to move us to this or that good action and so great a sacrifice; but from this it cannot be inferred with certainty that the real determining cause of the will was not actually a covert impulse of self-love under the mere pretense of that idea; for which we then gladly flatter ourselves with the false presumption of a nobler motive, whereas in fact we can never, even by the most strenuous examination, get entirely behind our covert incentives, because when moral worth is at issue what counts is not the actions, which one sees, but their inner principles, which one does not see.

Moreover, one cannot better serve the wishes of those who ridicule all morality as the mere phantasm of a human imagination overreaching itself through self-conceit, than by conceding to them that the concepts of duty had to be drawn solely from experience (as people gladly find comfort in persuading themselves is the case with all remaining concepts as well); for then one

affords them a sure triumph. From love of humanity I am willing to concede that the majority of our actions conforms with duty; but if we look more closely at the imaginations and intentions of their thoughts we everywhere come up against the dear self, which is always flashing forth, and it is on this – and not on the strict command of duty, which in many cases would require self-denial – that their purpose relies. One need not even be an enemy of virtue, but only a cold-blooded observer who does not at once take the liveliest wish for the good as its actuality, to become doubtful at certain moments (principally with advancing years and a power of judgment that experience has partly made wiser and partly more acute in observation) whether any true virtue is actually to be found in the world at all. And here nothing can protect us from falling away entirely from our ideas of duty and preserve a well-founded respect for its law in our soul, except the clear conviction that, even if there never have been actions that have sprung from 4:408 such pure sources, still, what is at issue here is not at all whether this or that does happen, but that reason by itself and independently of all appearances commands what ought to happen; and hence that actions of which the world so far has perhaps not yet given an example, and the feasibility of which might be very much doubted by someone who makes experience the foundation of everything, are still unrelentingly commanded by reason; and that e.g. pure sincerity in friendship can no less be required of everyone even if up to now there had never been a sincere friend; because this duty as a duty as such, prior to all experience, lies in the idea of a reason determining the will by a priori grounds.

If one adds that, unless one wants to refuse the concept of morality all truth and reference to some possible object, one cannot deny that its law is so extensive in its significance that it must hold not merely for human beings but for all *rational beings as such*, not merely under contingent conditions and with exceptions, but with *absolute necessity*; then it is clear that no experience can give occasion to infer even just the possibility of such apodictic laws. For by what right can we bring what is perhaps valid only under the contingent conditions of humanity into unlimited respect, as a universal prescription for every rational nature, and how shall laws of the determination of *our* will be taken as laws of the determination of the will of a rational being as such and, only as such, for our will as well, if they were merely empirical, and did not originate completely a priori from pure but practical reason?

Moreover, one could not give morality worse counsel than by seeking to borrow it from examples. For every example of it that is presented to me must itself first be judged according to principles of morality, whether it is actually worthy to serve as an original example, i.e. as a model; but by no means can it furnish the concept of it at the outset. Even the Holy One of the Gospel d must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before he is recognized as one e; also, he says of himself: why do you call me (whom you see) good, there is none good (the archetype of the good) but one, that is, God (whom you do not see).¹⁰ But whence do we have the concept of God, 4:409 as the highest good? Solely from the *idea* that reason a priori devises of moral perfection, and connects inseparably with the concept of a free will. Imitation has no place at all in moral matters, and examples serve for encouragement only, i.e. they put beyond doubt the feasibility of what the law commands, they make intuitive what the practical rule expresses more generally, but they can never entitle us to set aside their true original, which lies in reason, and to go by examples.

If, then, there is no genuine supreme principle of morality that would not have to rest merely on pure reason independently of all experience, I believe it unnecessary even to ask whether it is a good thing to set forth these concepts in general (in abstracto) as they, along with the principles

that belong to them, are established a priori, if this cognition is to differ from common cognition and to be called philosophical. But in our age this may well be necessary. For if one were to collect votes as to what is to be preferred – pure rational cognition separated off from anything empirical, hence metaphysics of morals, or popular practical philosophy – one will soon guess on which side the preponderance will fall.

This condescension to popular concepts is certainly very commendable if the elevation to the principles of pure reason has already happened and been achieved to complete satisfaction; and that would mean first *founding* the doctrine of morals on metaphysics and, when it has been established, afterwards obtaining *access* for it by means of popularity. But it is without rhyme or reason to want to comply with it in the first investigation, on which all correctness of principles depends. Not only can this procedure never lay claim to the supremely rare merit of a true *philosophical popularity*, since there is no art in making oneself commonly understood when one renounces all thorough insight; it brings to light a disgusting mish-mash of gleaned observations and half-rationalizing principles, which dreary pates savor because it is quite useful for everyday chatter, while men of insight feel confused, and discontented – yet unable to help themselves – avert their eyes, even though philosophers, who quite easily see through the dazzling deception, get little hearing when they call for suspending this ^{4:410} pretended popularity for a while, to earn the rightful permission to be popular only when they have first acquired determinate insight.

One need only look at the essays on morality in that much admired taste, and one will find in a marvelous mixture now the special function of human nature (but once in a while also the idea of a rational nature as such), now perfection, now happiness, here moral feeling, there fear of God, a bit of this and a bit of that; but it does not occur to anyone to ask whether the principles of morality are to be sought in our acquaintance with human nature at all (which after all we can get only from experience) and, if this is not the case – if these principles are to be found completely a priori, free from all that is empirical, simply in pure rational concepts and nowhere else, not even in the least part – to resolve rather to separate off entirely this investigation as pure practical philosophy, or (if one may employ so notorious a name) as a metaphysics* of morals, to bring it all by itself to its entire completeness, and to put off a public that demands popularity until the conclusion of this undertaking.

But such a completely isolated metaphysics of morals, mixed with no anthropology, no theology, no physics or hyperphysics,^g still less with occult qualities (which one might call hypophysical^h), is not just an indispensable substrate of all theoretical securely determined cognition of duties, but at the same time a desideratum of the highest importance for the actual execution of its prescriptions. For the pure representation of duty, and in general of the moral law, mixed with no alien addition of empirical stimuli, has by the route of reason alone (which in this first becomes aware that by itself it can also be practical) an influence on the human heart so much more powerful than all other ^{4:411} incentives[†] one can summon from the empirical field, that reason, in the consciousness of its dignity, regards the latter with contempt, and little by little can master them; in the place of which a mixed doctrine of morals, composed of incentives of feelings and inclinations and at the same time of rational concepts, must make the mind waverⁱ between motives that can be brought under no principle, that can lead only very contingently to what is good, but quite often also to what is evil.

It is clear from what has been said that all moral concepts have their seat and origin completely a priori in reason, and indeed in the commonest human reason, just as in that which is speculative in the highest measure; that they cannot be abstracted from any empirical and hence merely contingent cognition; that their dignity to serve us as supreme practical principles lies just in this purity of their origin; that every time in adding anything empirical to them one takes away as much from their genuine influence and from the unlimited worth of actions; that it is not only a requirement of the greatest necessity for theoretical purposes, when only speculation counts, but also a matter of the greatest practical importance to draw its concepts and laws from pure reason, to set them forth pure and unmingled, indeed to determine the scope of this entire practical but pure rational cognition, i.e. the entire faculty of pure practical reason, and in so doing not – as speculative philosophy may well permit, indeed at times even finds necessary – to make its principles dependent on the 4:412 particular nature of human reason, but because moral laws are to hold for every rational being as such, already to derive them from the universal concept of a rational being as such, and in this way (as should be possible in this species of entirely separate cognitions) completely to set forth all moral science – which for its *application* to human beings needs anthropology – first independently of this as pure philosophy, i.e. as metaphysics; well aware that without being in its possession it would be futile, I do not say to determine precisely for speculative judging the moral element of duty in everything that conforms with duty, but impossible to found morals on their genuine principles even for the merely common and practical use, principally of moral instruction, and thereby to effect pure moral dispositions and to engraft them on people's minds for the highest good of the world.

However, in order to progress in this work by its natural steps not merely from common moral judging (which is worthy of great respect here) to philosophical, as has been done elsewhere, but from a popular philosophy – that goes no further than it can get by groping by means of examples – to metaphysics (which does not let itself be held back any further by anything empirical and, as it must survey the totality of rational cognition of this kind, perhaps goes up to ideas, where even examples desert us), we must trace and distinctly present the practical rational faculty from its general rules of determination up to where there arises from it the concept of duty.

Ak. 4:412-417 (required)

Every thing in nature works according to laws. Only a rational being has the capacity to act *according to the representation* of laws, i.e. according to principles, or a *will*. Since *reason* is required for deriving actions from laws, the will is nothing other than practical reason. If reason determines the will without fail, then the actions of such a being that are recognized as objectively necessary are also subjectively necessary; i.e. the will is a capacity to choose *only that* which reason, independently of inclination, recognizes as practically necessary, i.e. as good. If, however, reason all by itself does not sufficiently determine the will, if it is also subject to subjective conditions (to certain incentives) that are not always in agreement with the objective ones; in 4:413 a word, if the will does not *in itself* completely conform with reason (as is actually the case with human beings), then actions objectively recognized as necessary are subjectively contingent, and the determination of such a will, in conformity with objective laws, is *necessitation*; i.e. the relation of objective laws to a will not altogether good is represented as the determination of the will of a rational being by grounds of reason, to which this will is not, however, according to its nature necessarily obedient.

The representation of an objective principle in so far as it is necessitating for a will is called a command (of reason), and the formula of the command is called **imperative**.

All imperatives are expressed by an *ought*, and by this indicate the relation of an objective law of reason to a will that according to its subjective constitution is not necessarily determined by it (a necessitation). They say that to do or to omit something would be good, but they say it to a will that does not always do something just because it is represented to it that it would be good to do it. Practically *good*, however, is what determines the will by means of representations of reason, hence not from subjective causes, but objectively, i.e. from grounds that are valid for every rational being, as such. It is distinguished from the *agreeable*, as that which influences the will only by means of sensation from merely subjective causes, which hold only for the senses of this or that one, and not as a principle of reason, which holds for everyone. *

4:414 Thus a perfectly good will would just as much stand under objective laws (of the good), but it could not be represented as thereby *necessitated* to actions that conform with laws, because it can of itself, according to its subjective constitution, be determined only by the representation of the good. Therefore no imperatives hold for the *divine* will and generally for a *holy* will: here the *ought* is out of place, because *willing* already of itself necessarily agrees with the law. Therefore imperatives are only formulae to express the relation of objective laws of willing as such to the subjective imperfection of the will of this or that rational being, e.g. of the human will.

Now, all *imperatives* command either *hypothetically*, or *categorically*. The former represent the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else that one wants (or that at least is possible for one to want). The categorical imperative would be the one that represented an action as objectively necessary by itself, without reference to another end.

Because every practical law represents a possible action as good and hence, for a subject practically determinable by reason, as necessary, all imperatives are formulae for the determination of an action necessary according to the principle of a will that is good in some way. Now, if the action would be good merely as a means to *something else*, the imperative is *hypothetical*; if the action is represented as good *in itself*, hence as necessary in a will that in itself conforms to reason, as its principle, then it is *categorical*.

The imperative thus says which action possible by me would be good, and represents the practical rule in relation to a will that does not at once do an action just because it is good, partly because the subject does not always know that it is good, partly because, even if he knew this, his maxims could still be opposed to the objective principles of a practical reason.

The hypothetical imperative thus says only that the action is good for some *possible* or *actual* purpose. In the first 4:415 case it is a **problematically** practical principle, in the second an **assertorically** practical principle. The categorical imperative, which declares the action to be of itself objectively *necessary* without reference to any purpose, i.e. even apart from any other end, holds as an **apodictically** practical principle.

What is possible only by means of powers of some rational being can also be thought as a purpose possible for some will, and therefore there are in fact infinitely many principles of action, in so far as it is represented as necessary for attaining some possible purpose to be effected by it. All sciences have some practical part that consists of tasks to make some end possible for us, and of imperatives as to how it can be attained. These can therefore as such be called imperatives of **skill**.

There is no question here whether the end is rational and good, but only what one must do in order to attain it. The prescriptions for the physician thoroughly to cure his man, and for a poisoner reliably to kill him, are of equal worth, in so far as each serves to effect its purpose perfectly. Since in early youth it is unknown what ends we might encounter in life, parents principally seek to have their children learn ever so *many kinds of things*, and take care to develop *skill* in the use of means to all sorts of *discretionary* ends; they cannot determine whether any of them could in the future actually become the purpose of their protégé, while it is entirely *possible* that one day he might have it; and with this they take so much care that they commonly fail to form and to correct their judgment about the worth of the things they might make their ends.

Even so, there is *one* end that can be presupposed as actual in all rational beings (in so far as imperatives suit them, namely as dependent beings), and thus one purpose that they not merely *can* have, but that one can safely presuppose they one and all actually *do have* according to a natural necessity, and that is the purpose of *happiness*. The hypothetical imperative that represents the practical necessity of an action as a means to the advancement of happiness is **assertoric**. One must present it as necessary not merely to some uncertain, merely possible purpose, but to a purpose that one can presuppose safely and a priori in every human being, 4:416 because it belongs to his essence. Now, the skill in the choice of the means to one's own greatest well-being can be called **prudence*** in the narrowest sense. Thus the imperative that refers to the choice of means to one's own happiness, i.e. the prescription of prudence, is still *hypothetical*; the action is not commanded per se, but just as a means to another purpose.

Finally, there is one imperative that – without presupposing as its condition any other purpose to be attained by a certain course of conduct – commands this conduct immediately. This imperative is **categorical**. It concerns not the matter of the action or what is to result from it, but the form and the principle from which it does itself follow; and the essential good in it consists in the disposition, let the result be what it may. This imperative may be called that **of morality**.

Willing according to these three kinds of principles is also clearly distinguished by the *unequal manner* in which they necessitate the will. Now, to make this noticeable they would, I believe, be labeled most suitably in their order by saying that they are either *rules* of skill, or *counsels* of prudence, or *commands (laws)* of morality. For only the *law* carries with it the concept of an *unconditional* and indeed objective and hence universally valid *necessity*, and commands are laws that must be obeyed, i.e. must be complied with even contrary to inclination. *Giving counsel* does indeed contain necessity, but it can hold only under a subjective contingent condition, if this or that human being counts this or that as belonging to his happiness; whereas the categorical imperative is limited by no condition, and as absolutely and yet practically necessary can quite properly be called a command. Imperatives of the first kind could also be called *technical* (belonging to art), the 4:417 second *pragmatic** (to welfare), the third *moral* (belonging to free conduct as such, i.e. to morals).

Ak. 4:417-419 (recommended)

Now the question arises: how are all these imperatives possible? This question does not call for knowledge of how to conceive the execution of the action that the imperative commands, but merely of the necessitation of the will that the imperative expresses in its task. How an imperative of skill is possible probably requires no special discussion. Whoever wills the end also wills (in so

far as reason has decisive influence on his actions) the indispensably necessary means to it that is in his control. As far as willing is concerned, this proposition is analytic; for in the willing of an object, as my effect, my causality is already thought, as an acting cause, i.e. the use of means, and the imperative already extracts the concept of actions necessary to this end from the concept of a willing of this end (synthetic propositions are certainly needed to determine the means themselves to an intended purpose, but they concern the ground for actualizing not the act of will, but the object). That in order to divide a line into two equal parts according to a reliable principle I must make two intersecting arcs from its extremities, mathematics admittedly teaches by synthetic propositions only; but it is an analytic proposition that – when I know that the effect I have in mind can come about by such action alone – if I completely will the effect I also will the action required for it; for to represent something as an effect possible by me in a certain way, and myself, with regard to it, as acting in this way, that is one and the same thing.

The imperatives of prudence would totally and entirely coincide with those of skill, and be equally analytic, if only it were so easy to provide a determinate concept of happiness. For here as well as there it would be said: whoever wills the end also wills (in conformity with reason necessarily) the only means to it that are in 4:418 his control. But, unfortunately, the concept of happiness is so indeterminate a concept that, even though every human being wishes to achieve it, yet he can never say determinately and in agreement with himself what he actually wishes and wants. The cause of this is: that the elements that belong to the concept of happiness are one and all empirical, i.e. must be borrowed from experience and that, even so, for the idea of happiness an absolute whole is required, a maximum of well-being, in my present and every future condition. Now, it is impossible that the most insightful and at the same time singularly able, but still finite being should make for himself a determinate concept of what he actually wants here. If he wants riches, how much worry, envy and intrigue might he not by this bring down upon his shoulders! If he wants much cognition and insight, that might perhaps only sharpen his eyes all the more, to show him as all the more terrible the ills that are still concealed from him now and yet cannot be avoided, or to burden his desires, which already give him enough trouble, with more needs still. If he wants a long life, who will guarantee him that it would not be a long misery? If at least he wants health, how often has not bodily discomfort kept someone from excess into which unlimited health would have plunged him, and so on. In short, he is not able to determine with complete certainty, according to any principle, what will make him truly happy, because omniscience would be required for this. To be happy, one cannot therefore act on determinate principles, but only according to empirical counsels, e.g. of diet, of thrift, of politeness, of restraint, and so on, which experience teaches on average advance well-being most. From this it follows that the imperatives of prudence cannot, to be precise, command at all, i.e. present actions objectively as practically *necessary*; that they are to be taken rather as counsels (*consilia*) than as commands (*praecepta*) of reason; that the problem of determining reliably and universally which action would advance the happiness of a rational being is completely insoluble, and hence that there can be no imperative with regard to it that would in the strict sense command to do what makes us happy because happiness is not an ideal of reason, but of the imagination, which rests merely on empirical grounds, of which it is 4:419 futile to expect that they should determine an action by which the totality of an in fact infinite series of consequences would be attained. This imperative of prudence would, however, be an analytic practical proposition if one assumes that the means to happiness could be reliably stated; for it differs from the imperative of skill only in this, that in the case of the latter the end is merely possible, whereas in the former it is given: but since both merely command the means to that

which one presupposes one wills as an end, the imperative that commands willing the means for someone who wills the end is in both cases analytic. There is thus no difficulty with regard to the possibility of such an imperative either.

Ak. 4:419-424 (required)

By contrast, the question of how the imperative of *morality* is possible is no doubt the only one in need of a solution, since it is not hypothetical at all, and thus the objectively represented necessity cannot rely on any presupposition, as in the case of the hypothetical imperatives. However, it is never to slip our attention in this matter that it cannot be made out *by any example*, and hence empirically, whether there is any such imperative at all; but to be dreaded that all imperatives that appear categorical may yet in some hidden way be hypothetical. E.g. when it is said that you ought not to make deceitful promises; and one assumes that the necessity of this omission is not merely giving counsel for avoiding some other ill, so that what is said would be: you ought not to make lying promises lest, if it comes to light, you are deprived of your credit; but that an action of this kind must be considered as by itself evil, thus that the imperative of the prohibition is categorical; one still cannot establish in any example with certainty that the will is here determined, without another incentive, merely by the law, even if it appears so; for it is always possible that fear of embarrassment, perhaps also an obscure dread of other dangers, may covertly influence the will. Who can prove the non-existence of a cause by experience when all that it teaches is that we do not perceive one? In that case, however, the so-called moral imperative, which as such appears categorical and unconditional, would in fact just be a pragmatic prescription that alerts us to our advantage, and merely teaches us to attend to it.

We shall thus have to investigate the possibility of a *categorical* imperative entirely a priori, since we do not here 4:420 enjoy the advantage that its actuality is being given in experience, in which case its possibility would be necessary not for corroboration, but merely for explanation. For the time being, however, this much can be seen: that the categorical imperative alone expresses a practical **law**, and that the others can indeed one and all be called *principles* of the will, but not laws; since what it is necessary to do merely for attaining a discretionary purpose can be regarded as in itself contingent, and we can always be rid of the prescription if we give up the purpose, whereas the unconditional command leaves the will no free discretion with regard to the opposite, and hence alone carries with it that necessity which we demand for a law.

Secondly, in the case of this categorical imperative or law of morality the ground of the difficulty (of insight into its possibility) is actually very great. It is an a priori synthetic practical proposition, * and since gaining insight into the possibility of propositions of this kind causes so much difficulty in theoretical cognition, it can easily be inferred that in practical cognition there will be no less. 13

With this problem, we shall first try to see whether the mere concept of a categorical imperative may perhaps also furnish its formula, which contains the proposition that alone can be a categorical imperative; for how such an absolute command is possible, even if we know how to express it, will still require particular and arduous effort, which we suspend, however, until the final section.

When I think of a *hypothetical* imperative as such I do not know in advance what it will contain, until I am given the condition. But when I think of a *categorical* imperative I know at once what it contains. For since besides the law the imperative contains only the necessity of the maxim ^{4:421} to conform with this law, whereas the law contains no condition to which it was limited, nothing is left but the universality of a law as such, with which the maxim of the action ought to conform, and it is this conformity alone that the imperative actually represents as necessary.

There is therefore only a single categorical imperative, and it is this: *act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.*

Now, if from this one imperative all imperatives of duty can be derived as from their principle, then, even though we leave it unsettled whether what is called duty is not as such an empty concept, we shall at least be able to indicate what we think by it and what the concept means.

Since the universality of the law according to which effects happen constitutes that which is actually called *nature* in the most general sense (according to its form), i.e. the existence of things in so far as it is determined according to universal laws, the universal imperative of duty could also be expressed as follows: *so act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature.*

We shall now enumerate some duties, according to their usual division, into duties to ourselves and to other human beings, into perfect and imperfect duties. *

1) Someone who feels weary of life because of a series of ills that has grown to the point of hopelessness is still ^{4:422} so far in possession of his reason that he can ask himself whether it is not perhaps contrary to a duty to oneself to take one's own life. Now he tries out: whether the maxim of his action could possibly become a universal law of nature. But his maxim is: from self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life if, when protracted any longer, it threatens more ill than it promises agreeableness. The only further question is whether this principle of self-love could become a universal law of nature. But then one soon sees that a nature whose law it were to destroy life itself by means of the same sensation the function of which it is to impel towards the advancement of life, would contradict itself and would thus not subsist as a nature, hence that that maxim could not possibly take the place of a universal law of nature, and consequently conflicts entirely with the supreme principle of all duty.

2) Another sees himself pressured by need to borrow money. He knows full well that he will not be able to repay, but also sees that nothing will be lent to him unless he solemnly promises to repay it at a determinate time. He feels like making such a promise; but he still has enough conscience to ask himself: is it not impermissible and contrary to duty to help oneself out of need in such a way? Suppose that he still resolved to do so, his maxim of the action would go as follows: when I believe myself to be in need of money I shall borrow money, and promise to repay it, even though I know that it will never happen. Now this principle of self-love, or of one's own benefit, is perhaps quite consistent with my whole future well-being, but the question now is: whether it is right? I therefore transform the imposition of self-love into a universal law, and arrange the question as follows: how things would stand if my maxim became a universal law. Now, I then see at once that it could never hold as a universal law of nature and harmonize with itself, but must necessarily contradict itself. For the universality of a law that everyone, once he believes himself to be in need, could promise

whatever he fancies with the intention not to keep it, would make the promise and the end one may pursue with it itself impossible, as no one would believe he was being promised anything, but would laugh about any such utterance, as a vain pretense.

3) A third finds in himself a talent that by means of some ^{4:423} cultivation could make him a useful human being in all sorts of respects. However, he sees himself in comfortable circumstances and prefers to give himself up to gratification rather than to make the effort to expand and improve his fortunate natural predispositions. Yet he still asks himself: whether his maxim of neglecting his natural gifts, besides its agreement with his propensity to amusement, also agrees with what one calls duty. Now he sees that a nature could indeed still subsist according to such a universal law, even if human beings (like the South Sea Islanders) should let their talents rust and be intent on devoting their lives merely to idleness, amusement, procreation, in a word, to enjoyment; but he cannot possibly **will** that this become a universal law of nature, or as such be placed in us by natural instinct. For as a rational being he necessarily wills that all capacities in him be developed, because they serve him and are given to him ^p for all sorts of possible purposes.

Yet a *fourth*, who is prospering while he sees that others have to struggle with great hardships (whom he could just as well help), thinks: what's it to me? May everyone be as happy as heaven wills, or as he can make himself, I shall take nothing away from him, not even envy him; I just do not feel like contributing anything to his well-being, or his assistance in need! Now, certainly, if such a way of thinking were to become a universal law of nature, the human race could very well subsist, and no doubt still better than when everyone chatters about compassion and benevolence, even develops the zeal to perform such actions occasionally, but also cheats wherever he can, sells out the right of human beings, or infringes it in some other way. But even though it is possible that a universal law of nature could very well subsist according to that maxim, it is still impossible to **will** that such a principle hold everywhere as a law of nature. For a will that resolved upon this would conflict with itself, as many cases can yet come to pass in which one needs the love and compassion of others, and in which, by such a law of nature sprung from his own will, he would rob himself of all hope of the assistance he wishes for himself.

These, then, are some of the many actual duties, or at least of what we take to be such, whose division ^q can clearly be seen from the one ^{4:424} principle stated above. One must *be able to will* that a maxim of our action become a universal law: this is as such the canon of judging it morally. Some actions are such that their maxim cannot even be *thought* without contradiction as a universal law of nature; let alone that one could *will* that it *should* become such. In the case of others that inner impossibility is indeed not to be found, but it is still impossible to *will* that their maxim be elevated to the universality of a law of nature, because such a will would contradict itself. It is easy to see that the first conflicts with strict or narrower (unrelenting) duty, the second only with wider (meritorious) duty, and thus that all duties, as far as the kind of obligation (not the object of their action) is concerned, have by these examples been set out completely in their dependence on the one principle.

Notes

y As so often, it is not entirely clear whether *allgemein* means “general” or “universal.”

z *untrügliche Art*; the principle is reliable and trustworthy

9. In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates (ca. 470–399 BC) teaches an ignorant slave boy to double the area of a square by helping him to develop his own mathematical potential. This is meant to demonstrate the a priori character of geometry, and the pre-existence of the human soul. However, Kant may also be thinking of Socrates's professed method of midwifery in the *Theaetetus*. On the "Socratic method," see also *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:411 and 6:479.

a *sehikanieren*, to obstruct the claims of conscience, like a pettifogger in a law court

b or "fair"; "equitable" in a juridical context

x This parenthetical remark is an addition of the second edition.

c The standard translation has been retained, but it is problematic. *Gesinnung* is not just a disposition to behave in a certain way, but one's moral attitude, state of mind, conviction, or character.

d Jesus Christ

e as a model

10. Cf. Luke 18:19, Matthew 19:17, and Mark 10:18.

f *das Übergewicht*, second edition. The first edition has *die Wahrheit*, which makes no sense. Kant's original manuscript may have read *die Wahl*, "the choice."

* One can, if one wants to, distinguish (just as pure mathematics is distinguished from applied, and pure logic from applied, thus) pure philosophy of morals (metaphysics) from applied (namely to human nature). Also, by using this label one is reminded at once that moral principles are not to be founded on the peculiarities of human nature but must exist a priori by themselves, and that from such principles it must be possible to derive practical rules for every rational nature, and thus for human nature as well.

g that which lies *beyond* physical nature

h that which *underlies* physical nature

† I have a letter from the late excellent *Sulzer*, in which he asks me what the cause may be that the doctrines^j of virtue, however convincing they are to reason, yet accomplish so little.¹¹ My reply was delayed by my preparations for making it complete. However, it is none other than that the teachers themselves have not purified their concepts, and as they try to do too well by getting hold of motives to moral goodness everywhere, to make their medicine ever so strong, they spoil it. For the commonest observation shows that when one represents an action of righteousness – as it was performed with a steadfast soul, without aiming at any advantage, in this world or another, even under the greatest temptations of need, or of enticement – it leaves far behind and obscures every similar action that was even in the least affected by an alien incentive, that it elevates the soul and stirs up the wish to be able to act like that too. Even children of intermediate age feel this impression, and one should never represent duties to them in any other way.

i *schwankend*, second edition; the first has *verwirrt*, "confused"

k The first edition reads "examples that were adequate to the former desert us"

* The dependence of the desiderative faculty on sensations is called inclination, and this therefore always proves a *need*. The dependence, however, of a contingently determinable will^l on principles of reason is called an *interest*. This therefore takes place only within a dependent will, which does not of itself always conform with reason; in the divine will, interest is inconceivable. But even the human will can *take an interest* in something without therefore *acting from interest*. The first signifies the *practical* interest in the action, the second the *pathological* interest in the object of the action. The first indicates only dependence of the will on principles of reason by itself, the second on its principles for the sake of inclination, namely when reason states only the practical rule as to how to remedy the need of inclination. In the first case the action interests me, in the second the object of the action (in so far as it is agreeable 4:414 to me). We saw in the first section: that in an action from duty one must pay attention not to the interest in the object, but merely to that in the action itself and in its principle in reason (the law).

m "and a priori" was added for the second edition

n second edition; the first edition has "nature"

* The word prudence is taken in a twofold sense: in one it may bear the name of worldly prudence, in the other that of private prudence. The first is the skill of a human being to influence others so as to use them for his purposes; the second the insight to unite all these purposes to his own enduring advantage. The latter is actually the one to which even the worth of the former is traced back, and someone who is prudent in the first sense, but not in the second, of him one might better say: he is clever and crafty, and yet on the whole imprudent.

* Methinks the actual meaning of the word *pragmatic* can be most accurately determined in this way. For *sanctions* are called pragmatic that do not actually flow from the right of states, as necessary laws, but from their *provision* for the general welfare. A *history* is composed in a pragmatic manner if it makes us *prudent*, i.e. instructs the world how it can take care of its advantage better than, or at least just as well as, in previous times.¹²

o second edition; the first has “but when one asserts that an action”

* Without a presupposed condition from any inclination, I connect the deed with the will a priori, and hence necessarily (though only objectively, i.e. under the idea of a reason that has complete control over all subjective motives). This is therefore a practical proposition that does not derive the willing of an action analytically from willing another that is already presupposed (for we have no such perfect will), but connects it immediately with the concept of the will of a rational being, as something that is not contained in it.

13. The investigation of the possibility of synthetic principles a priori was the central task of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/87) and the *Prolegomena* (1783).

† A *maxim* is the subjective principle for acting, and must be distinguished from the *objective principle*, namely the practical law. The former contains the 4:421 practical rule that reason determines in conformity with the conditions of the subject (quite often his ignorance, or his inclinations), and is thus the principle according to which the subject *acts*; but the law is the objective principle, valid for every rational being, and the principle according to which it *ought to act*, i.e. an imperative.

* Here one must duly note that I reserve the division of duties entirely for my future *Metaphysics of Morals*, and that this one here is put forward only as discretionary (to order my examples).¹⁴ Further, I here understand by a perfect duty the one that allows of no exception to the advantage of inclination, and then I have not merely external but also internal *perfect duties*, which runs counter to the use of the word adopted in the schools; but I do not mean to answer for it here, since for my purpose it is all one whether or not one concedes it to me.

p “and are given to him” is an addition of the second edition

q Both the first and the second original edition have *Abteilung* (division). Editors and translators since the nineteenth century, including Mary Gregor, tend to substitute *Ableitung* (“derivation”), but note that Kant has presented a division of duties that is meant to be evident *from the above principle*, i.e. the fourfold application of the law-of-nature formulation, further explained in the present paragraph.