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Mark E. Harris

University of Southern Mississippi

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Examining Moral Necessity in the Kantian Categorical Imperative

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could not be the basis of a law. When these inclina-

Moral necessity is the idea that specific imperatives bind the actions of a moral agent regardless of his or her personal goals or wishes. Contemporary ethicists have debated whether the moral system of Immanuel Kant includes rules which do in fact bind necessarily on the moral agent. This paper will argue that Kant's categorical imperative does not bind necessarily. The three different formulas given for the categorical imperative can each be used to derive different moral rules. If varying and conflicting rules can be constructed depending on which formula is used, then it is impossible to know which rule, if any, binds necessarily. Thus the Kantian deontological system, though based in reason, does not show how moral necessity can be derived from reason. However, this failure does not preclude the existence of moral necessity. It is even still possible that necessity could rest its foundations on reason, though Kant has not shown that such a foundation exists. It is important to note this failure since many modern-day Kantian ethicists argue for necessary moral rules and actions based in reason and the categorical imperative.¹ Their arguments and moral prescriptions must be ignored or substantially amended if the Kantian perspective is suspect. Furthermore, a failure or contradiction present in Kantian philosophy would mean that a new, sound deontological morality would be needed.

In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant relies on a foundation of *a priori* universal concepts to establish the categorical imperative, which is the cornerstone of his deontological² moral framework.³ With this imperative, he develops a law-conception of ethics in which adherence to a moral law determines the permissibility of an action. A person will often feel that he or she will *have* to do a particular action. This *having to* is what Kant most wants to explain. He believes that if a law is to hold morally "as a ground of obligation," then it "must carry with it absolute necessity."⁴ He finds that a moral law based on empirical facts could not carry with it necessity since empirical facts do not apply identically to all rational agents. Thus his ethical system depends solely on reason.⁵

In attempting to explain necessity, he assumes that there actually are moral duties. He considers "duty" to be equivalent to moral necessity. A duty is thus something that a person is bound to do.⁶ Necessity binds regardless of personal interests, since a personal interest would represent a mo-

tions are dispensed with as morally impertinent, only the law and respect for the law can determine the will.⁷

Since there is nothing personal about the law which binds a person to duty, then the law must bind all rational beings. Kant calls this law the categorical imperative, since it binds regardless of a person's interests. Practical rules which are not universally binding he refers to as hypothetical imperatives, since they depend on a person's individual interests. The substance of the categorical imperative is essentially "do your duty," but Kant formulates this instruction in various ways. The first formulation he gives is derived from his conclusion that the law must bind on all rational beings: "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law." Essentially, this formulation states that one must conform any particular action to a general rule or maxim, such as "do not lie" or "do not steal." Whatever rule one chooses, one must act according to a rule which *could* be followed by all rational beings. If one acts according to one's personal interests, which are not shared by all rational beings, then not all moral agents can act in the same way. Since the moral law must be able to bind on all persons,

this formulation stresses the requirement of *universalizability* for all moral maxims.

Kant goes on to discuss how the basis of the categorical imperative lies also in the rational nature of free persons. He says that the first formula necessitating that rational beings consider universally the maxim of their actions must be connected "with the concept of the will of a rational being as such."⁸ In other words, one must have a will capable of reason to even be able to consider maxims in this way. A will is essentially the ability to determine one's own actions in accordance with laws or rules.⁹ The will then becomes Kant's basis for the second formulation of the categorical imperative. Kant states that "every rational being *exists* as an end in itself, *not merely as a means* to be used by this or that will at its discretion."¹⁰ Essentially, because rational persons have the ability to determine themselves, they must not be determined by others, since this would violate the freedom inherent to having a will. He says that "an end in itself has not merely a relative worth...but an inner worth, that is, *dignity*."¹¹ To treat a person as a means to some other end would deny that they have an inner worth and tread upon his or her inherent dignity. From these ideas emerges the second formula of the categorical imperative: "Act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any

other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."¹² Essentially, one must not "use" a person to get something else, but must instead treat every rational being with respect. This applies universally to the actions of every rational agent since every rational being that an agent comes in contact with has his or her own will and the right to self-determination that comes with it.

Kant's ethical law rests, then, on reason, impartiality, and dignity. The further relevant question concerning the basis of his system is who authors this law. Kant answers:

We see philosophy put in a precarious position, which is to be firm even though there is nothing in heaven or earth from which it depends or on which it is based. Here philosophy is to manifest its purity as sustainer of its own laws, not as herald of laws that an implanted sense [...] whispers to it.¹³

In this passage Kant makes clear that, not only does the moral law not rest on empirical or earthly facts, but it also does not gain its authority from a divine mandate. G. E. M. Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre, twentieth-century detractors of Kant, have argued that God would have to be the author of the moral law in order for it to bind necessarily, but Kant be-

lieves that such authorship is unnecessary.^{14, 15} Kant says that the divine will, being perfectly good, is not determined by anything other than the law. There is no moral "ought" imperative on the divine will, since its volition is necessarily in accordance with the law; however, neither does the law emanate from the divine will.¹⁶ Rather, the law comes from philosophy, or reason.¹⁷

Reason does not operate by itself; rather, it is found exclusively in rational persons. Thus Kant believes that a rational agent authors the moral law for himself or herself, rather than having any external authority impose the law on him or her. If an externality were to author the law, there would have to be an external incentive.¹⁸ A rule relying on an external incentive amounts only to a hypothetical imperative, one that a person will only act on if one desires the attached incentive, rather than a categorical imperative that applies universally regardless of interests or desires. Thus since the categorical imperative cannot be authored externally, it must be authored by one's own reason. One legislates the law to oneself and wills that one's actions be conformed to the law.

Though Kant articulates this concept of self-legislation, he does not then believe that morality is relative. He believes that all agents reasoning well will arrive at the same con-

clusions about the moral law. Rather than seeing morality as a matter of opinion or preference dictated by personal interests, he views it as the equivalent of mathematics or logic.¹⁹ There is a metaphysical component to morality that makes it objective.²⁰ Just as a person constructs objective mathematical principles through reason and applies those principles to arrive at real-world solutions, so also does a rational person construct objective moral principles and apply those principles to determine his or her actions.

Part of the reason Kant believes that all rational agents will arrive at the same conclusions is that he expects them to reason together. He asserts the "worthiness of every rational subject to be a lawgiving member in the kingdom of ends."²¹ By a "kingdom of ends," he means a society of persons in which the autonomy of each individual to be an end unto himself or herself is uncompromisingly respected.²² In such a society, no person would be unwillingly subjected to decisions made for him or her by another individual or by the state. Rather, each person would contribute in the community's determination of which moral imperatives were necessary and logically merited for bringing societal order. In other words,

each person would have some part in interpreting the categorical imperative, which forms an overarching template for laws, into specific rules for the community. Since everyone would be involved, each autonomous person would be able to agree

...contrary to his claim, the entire moral system cannot be derived from any single formula of the categorical imperative.

with the imperatives and with the reasoning for them; having agreed, each agent would be able to hold himself or herself accountable for adhering to them. By this process of reasoning through, agreeing to, and adhering to the community's rules, Kant believes that each person is "self-legislating" the imperatives. He or she is bringing the rule to bear on his or her own actions.

Thus, Kant builds an ethical theory on the will and reason of rational agents. The moral necessity of his system lies in the need for universalizable maxims and dignity-respecting actions, so that maxims can apply consistently to all rational beings and the autonomy of all agents remains intact. However, the discussion that follows will show that Kant's project fails because, contrary to his claim, the entire

moral system cannot be derived from any single formula of the categorical imperative. The three formulas he gives for the categorical imperative can be used to derive different moral rules. Because of the possibility of different rules, one cannot know which rule, if any, binds necessarily.

As shown above, Kant believes reason places certain constraints on what the moral law is, namely that a given edict can only be a moral law under certain conditions: the edict must be able to be followed by any rational being; any actions following from the edict must not compromise the autonomy of any rational being; and the edict should promote a society in which all rational beings are treated as autonomous ends. However, these constraints do not tell the actual content of the moral law; they merely tell the general form of the law.

Moral rules outlining the specific content of the law must be deduced from the categorical imperative. Kant believes that the three forms of the categorical imperative, each of which corresponds to one of the three conditions just mentioned, are three versions of the same rule. Because he believes that all moral rules can be deduced from the categorical imperative, and he believes the three formulas of the imperative to be giving the same message, he also

believes that all moral rules can be wholly deduced from any single formula.²³ In fact, he says that one should be able to make "a complete characterization of all maxims" by means of any of the three formulas.²⁴

His view that all three formulas are derived from reason makes this last point essential to his project. If it is impossible to deduce all necessary moral rules from any one of the three formulas provided by reason, then Kant has not shown how reason can be used to support moral necessity. If reason leads a person to deduce two or more viable rules for the same set of actions, then reason has not shown that any of the rules deduced must necessarily be followed. Showing that conflicting rules can be deduced from different formulas, as laid out below, would show that Kant has not established moral necessity.

There are two common interpretations of what Kant means by "reason," especially as it pertains to the universalizability of moral rules prescribed in the first formula. Reason can be seen as describing either pure logic or practical reason. If one takes reason as meaning "pure logic," then saying that a moral rule is universalizable simply means that the results of universalizing the rule are logically possible. If all rational agents can actually keep the rule simultaneously, then it is universalizable. For example,

under this interpretation the first formula would indicate that a maxim calling for slavery is not universalizable. Slavery requires that there be both slaves and slave-owners. It is not logically possible for all persons to be enslaved, since such a situation would not allow for the existence of slave-owners.

The exercise above shows that one can deduce a maxim against slavery from the first formula of the imperative. It is also evident that the same maxim can be deduced from the second and third formulas. Slavery by definition does not respect the autonomy of the slave, and it does not allow for a society in which all people are treated as ends-in-themselves. Thus slavery is addressed consistently by all three formulas of the rule. One knows what rule to follow concerning slavery since the categorical imperative only allows for one rule.

However, not all moral rules can be deduced consistently from the various formulas when one interprets reason to mean "pure logic." For example, Kant believes that making a false promise is an immoral action, and he shows from the second formula how the categorical imperative prohibits this action.²⁵ It is easy to see how such a prohibition can be derived from the formula concerning rational autonomy. Making a false promise would prevent a rational being from being able to

make an informed decision.

However, a world in which everyone makes false promises is not a logical impossibility, but merely inconvenient. One can readily imagine a world in which no one believes promises because all promises may be false. Thus, if one interprets reason to mean purely logic, then a prohibition against false promises cannot be derived from the first formula concerning the universalizability of maxims.

Alternatively, if one interprets "reason" to be referring to practical reason, one is able to derive the prohibition against false promises from the first formula of the categorical imperative. It would not be reasonable for false promises to be universally allowable. No one would ever believe any promises made, even if the person making the promise intended to keep it. People would eventually stop making promises altogether, which would certainly not be a practical situation. Thus it would be practically reasonable to have a prohibition against making false promises. Promises would then still be made and still be believed.

However, the practical considerations concerning promises are their believability and the consequences of the promise not being fulfilled. If a promise is believable, then the promisee can act based on it, whether or not it is a true or false promise. Further, if a promisor suffers no

negative consequences for failing to fulfill a promise,²⁶ then the practical benefits of promises are not interrupted should he or she make a false promise. The promisor will still be believed in future acts of promising. For example, one could make a false promise in complete confidence to a trusting person on his or her deathbed. The person would believe the promisor and there would be no negative consequences for this false promise-maker when the oath goes unfulfilled.

A rule allowing only false promises that would be believed and that would lack negative consequences would be equally practically reasonable to a maxim prohibiting all false promises. If one makes only false promises of this kind, no one would hold promises suspect and promises would still be made. All rational agents could make such promises without compromising the practicality of promise-making, thus preserving universalizability of the maxim.

Consequently, when reason is taken to have a practical consideration, there are at least two possible rules concerning false promises that could be universalized. One prohibits all false promises. The other permits only a certain kind of false promise for the sake of practicality. Both rules could be followed at all times and at all places with practical success by

all rational agents. However, the second and third formulas still call for the general prohibition of false promises. Thus, even under a different interpretation of the meaning of reason, the categorical imperative can still yield inconsistent rules to govern a single action. Even when one considers practical reason, one cannot necessarily know which rule should be followed.

The formula concerning autonomy of persons and the formula concerning a kingdom of ends always calls for a prohibition against making any false promises. However, one cannot derive that same rule with surety from the formula of universalizable maxims, regardless of whether one interprets reason to mean pure logic or practical reason. Thus one cannot derive all moral rules from any single formula. If one attempted to derive a body of rules from each formula individually, the three sets of maxims would differ and conflict. Since all three sets would be derived from reason, one could not rely on reason to decide which rules to follow; an arbitrary or subjective choice would have to be made. Kant's claim is then suspect that all three formulas are merely different versions of the same law, as reason then has not shown which rules are necessarily binding, especially if rules are derived from only one of the three formulas. Thus Kant has not established moral necessity within his

Reason, the basis of his moral structure, has led to conflicting rules with no way of determining which rule, if any, *must* be followed.²⁷

This is not to say, however, that it is completely impossible to base moral necessity in reason. It is possible that another ethical system could accomplish this if it gave a moral law from which only one set of moral rules could be derived, thus clearly establishing that specific rules bind necessarily. However, Kant's system fails to do this, largely because it has three different formulas of the categorical imperative as possible starting points, multiplying the odds that rules conflict. This failure means that Kantian ethical systems must be abandoned or seriously revised. Contemporary philosophers cannot simply cite Kantian ideas verbatim, since their statements could harbor unknown contradictions. A deontological moral system might be preferable, but the issues inherent in the Kantian system leave a gap in ethical philosophy. A new deontology is called for, one based on a single rule that can avoid the contradictions that come from multiple basic rules.

Endnotes

1 Contemporary Kantian supporters include Harry J. Gensler, SJ, and Thomas Nagel, who often appeal directly to Kan-

tian principles and ideas. However, this Kantian or Neo-Kantian school of thought is opposed by other moral ethicists in the contemporary era. Utilitarians, most notably Peter Singer, oppose Kantian thinking altogether in favor of an ethic based on the end result of actions. Virtue ethicists such as G. E. M. Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre support a system that calls for a person to exhibit certain integral characteristics, rather than choosing certain actions.

2 "Deontological" refers to a moral system based on specific rules, which tell the agent what actions are permissible. This differs from systems that call for actions based on utilitarian needs or the "greatest good." In Kant's system, the categorical imperative is the rule used to determine all other rules.

3 Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, English, trans. Mary J. Gregor, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 13.

7 Ibid., 13-14.

8 Ibid., 35.

9 Ibid., 36.

10 Ibid., 37.

11 Ibid., 42.

12 Ibid., 38.

13 Ibid., 35.

14 G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958), in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe, Volume Three: Ethics, Religion, and Poli-*

tics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981).

15 Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

16 Kant, 25.

17 This is also not to say that reason or philosophy is synonymous or substantially equivalent to God. Rather, because God is omniscient, He always acts in accordance to reason. However, He is not under the law, which is derived from reason. God is detached from the law, which Kant believes to constrain all non-divine rational agents.

18 An external incentive can be anything outside the agent which is cause for the agent to act. This could take many forms, including the promise of eternal paradise, a reward of money, or the avoidance of punishment.

19 Ibid., 22.

20 Ibid., 2, 21.

21 Ibid., 46.

22 Ibid., 45-46.

23 Kant, 43.

24 Ibid.

25 Kant, 15.

26 All external negative consequences would have to be absent, including damage to the promisor's reputation which might prevent him or her from being believed in the future.

27 It is worth noting the similarity between this criticism and the critiques of two prominent twentieth-century virtue ethicists, G. E. M. Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre, on

the Kantian system. Anscombe points out in "Modern Moral Philosophy" that Kant does not detail what counts as a relevant action to constructing a maxim. MacIntyre argues in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* that immoral and trivial rules could be universalized, so there is little distinctive about the rules that Kant wants to universalize. While similar, this criticism is distinct since it focuses on the difference between rules derived from different formulas, rather than the difficulty of defining a maxim or of showing specifically how universalizability pertains to moral maxims.