

The Categorical Imperative and the Grounds of Moral Rightness

Thomas Schmidt, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

1. Introduction

A common view about Kant's ethics

- Two Kantian claims:
 - (i) The fundamental principle of morality is the Categorical Imperative:
“act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (IV: 421).
 - (ii) A maxim is the “subjective principle of volition” (IV: 400) with which an agent performs some specific action.
- In view of (i) and (ii), it might seem as if Kant is committed to hold that whether an action is morally right depends on the agent's actual will.

Claims of this talk

- The view that whether an action is morally right depends on the agent's will is neither very attractive, nor should it be ascribed to Kant.
- Those who think otherwise confuse what should be seen as Kant's theory of moral rightness with his constitutivist metaethics. Reference to the good will plays a role in the latter, but not in the former.

2. Applying the Categorical Imperative

The case of the false promise

- Kant's prime example involving a maxim that is not as required by the Categorical Imperative is as follows:
“[Someone] sees himself pressured by distress into borrowing money. He knows very well that he will not be able to pay, but he also sees that nothing will be lent him if he does not firmly promise to pay at a determinate time. He wants to make such a promise; yet he has conscience enough to ask himself: ‘Is it not impermissible and contrary to duty to get out of distress in such a way?’ Supposing he nevertheless resolved on it, his maxim would be stated as follows: ‘If I believe myself to be in pecuniary distress, then I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, although I know this will never happen’. Now this principle of self-love, or of what is expedient for oneself, might perhaps be united with my entire future welfare, yet the question now is: ‘Is it right?’ I thus transform this claim of self-love into a universal law and set up the question thus: ‘How would it stand if my maxim became a universal law?’ Yet I see right away that it could never be valid as a universal law of nature and still agree with itself, but rather it would necessarily contradict itself. For the universality of a law that everyone who believes himself to be in distress could promise whatever occurred to him with the intention of not keeping it would make impossible the promise and the end one might have in making it, since no one would believe that anything has been promised him, but rather would laugh about every such utterance as vain pretense.” (IV: 422)

- Kant asks us to imagine someone who considers to act on the following maxim:
 “If I believe myself to be in pecuniary distress, then I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, although I know this will never happen” (IV: 422).
 This maxim, according to Kant, cannot be thought as a universal law, since a world in which everybody acts on it will evolve into a world in which the maxim cannot be acted on.

3. Kant on acting in accordance with duty

Two Kantian distinctions

actions		
in accordance with duty		contrary to duty
from duty	from inclination (e.g. love, self-interest etc.)	

The shopkeeper example

PRUDENT SHOPKEEPER. The Prudent Shopkeeper does “not overcharge his inexperienced customers” (IV: 397) out of self-interest.

[According to Kant, this shopkeeper acts *in accordance with duty*, but not *from duty*.]

MALICIOUS SHOPKEEPER. The Malicious Shopkeeper does not overcharge his customers in order to make somebody who betted that he will overcharge loose his bet.

GOOD SHOPKEEPER. The Good Shopkeeper does not overcharge his customers from duty.

[Kant does not discuss these two cases. There is reason to believe, however, that he would hold that the Malicious Shopkeeper and the Good Shopkeeper act in accordance with duty as well.]

‘In accordance with duty’ independent from actual will

Whether an action is in accordance with duty does not depend on the actual will (i.e. the actual intention) with which the action is performed.

4. ‘In accordance with duty’ and the Categorical Imperative

Explaining ‘in accordance with duty’: the task

What does ‘in accordance with duty’ depend on? The task is to complement the scheme

An action ϕ is in accordance with duty if, and only if, and because ...

in a way that is consistent with the following Kantian claims:

- (i) The Categorical Imperative is the fundamental principle of morality (see Section 2).
- (ii) ‘In accordance with duty’ is independent from the actual will (see Section 3).

The shopkeepers and the Categorical Imperative

agent	action	From duty?	In accordance with duty?	Maxim in accordance with Categorical Imperative?
Good Shopkeeper	not overcharging	+	+	+
Prudent Shopkeeper		-	+	+?
Malicious Shopkeeper		-	+	-

Explaining ‘in accordance with duty’: the solution

An action is in accordance with duty if, and only if, and because there is a maxim with which the action can be performed that conforms to the Categorical Imperative (i.e. if, and only if, and because there is a maxim that can be willed to be a universal law and with which the action can be performed).

Digression: an alternative view

- Here is a different way of thinking about the shopkeepers:

agent	action	From duty?	In accordance with duty?	Maxim in accordance with Categorical Imperative?
Good Shopkeeper	not overcharging	+	+	+
Prudent Shopkeeper		-	+	+
Malicious Shopkeeper		-	-	-

On the alternative view represented here, the following account of ‘in accordance with duty’ should be ascribed to Kant:

An action is in accordance with duty if, and only if, and because the agent’s (actual) maxim conforms to the Categorical Imperative.

- Even though this alternative view is supported by some textual evidence, the view proposed above is to be preferred as an interpretation of Kant’s position.

5. Moral rightness and the good will

In accordance with duty and moral rightness

- It is plausible to understand ‘... is in accordance with duty’ (when interpreted as proposed above) in the sense of ‘... is morally right’.
- Therefore, we should ascribe to Kant the following view:
 (R) An action is morally right if, and only if, and because there is a maxim that can be willed to be a universal law and with which the action can be performed.
 This principle not only states necessary and sufficient conditions for moral rightness but also what *makes right actions right* (or what *grounds moral rightness*).

The good will in (Kantian) normative ethics

normative ethics	
theory of moral rightness	theory of moral worth
no reference to actual or good will	about good will

6. Kantian constitutivism

The good will and the ideal agent

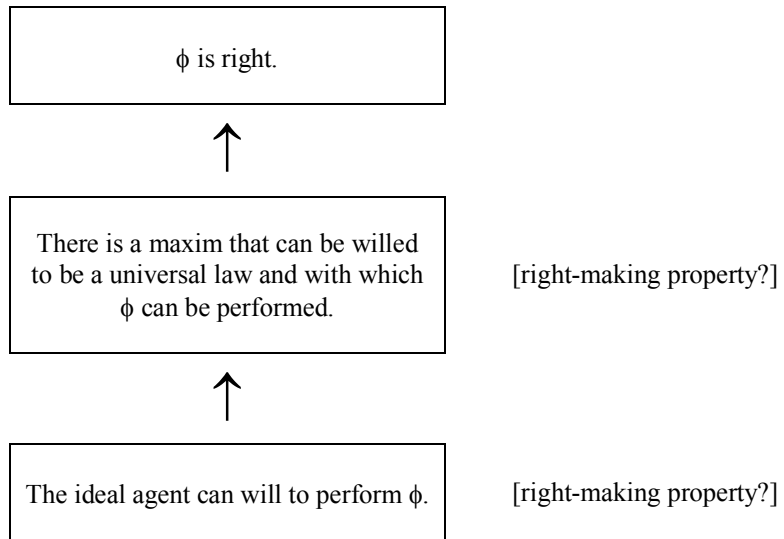
- Two crucial claims from Section III of the *Groundwork*:
 (1) “[A] free will and a will under moral laws are the same” (IV: 447).
 (2) A free will is a will fully determined by reason.
- In view of (1) and (2), we can ascribe to Kant the following claim:
 (3) The maxims of an ideal agent [i.e. of an agent with a good will] can be willed to be universal laws.

This entails a constitutivist claim:

- (C) The ideal agent can will to perform an action if, and only if, there is a maxim that can be willed to be a universal law and with which the action can be performed.
- What role could (C) play in a Kantian ethical theory of the sort described above?

Putting the constitutivist claim to use: first pass

- Consider the following argument:
 (1) An action is right if, and only if, the ideal agent can will to perform it.
 (2) The ideal agent can will to perform an action if, and only if, there is a maxim that can be willed to be a universal law and with which the action can be performed. [= (C)]
 (3) *Therefore*: an action is right if, and only if, there is a maxim that can be willed to be a universal law and with which the action can be performed.
- What is the right-making property?



Putting the constitutivist claim to use: second pass

