

## On the Relevance of the Categorical Imperative in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**Abstract:** The ethics of Immanuel Kant has the Categorical Imperative as its main tenet. Kant provides us the principles which could serve as guides by which we can judge the moral nature of our actions. He argues that an action is ought to be determined by practical reason i.e. anchored on a good will. Kant avers that if the will is ought to be good, it must not be motivated by any cause or end. In this light, this paper seeks to explore Kant's categorical imperative and to highlight its relevance in the 21st century wherein there is an evident moral confusion. To do this, I will first discuss the immanent moral decline brought about by the prevailing ideologies, especially the utilitarian attitude of man that tends to ignore the destructive tendencies of science and technology. Second, I will proceed on investigating the principles of categorical imperative. Finally, I will establish the indispensable need of man in the 21<sup>st</sup> century not only to understand, but also to enrich himself according to his practical reason, duty, and good will which are the very elements of the categorical imperative.

**Keywords:** categorical imperative, practical reason, utilitarianism

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Long before our present time, there has already been a serious decline in morality. This is mostly attributed to the proud claims of science and to man's reliance on technology. Accordingly, it was in the modern period (from 16<sup>th</sup> century to 19<sup>th</sup> century when science gained its momentum. It was granted with so much right and reputation that one would certainly debunk a claim unless it has undergone the rigors of scientific investigation. The belief that everything can be explained by science has a strong resonance to people reaching even those at the margins, because at last we can now have answers to the mysteries of being, life, and even of God.

On the other hand, the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the turn towards a more personal and subjective inquiry for philosophy.

Unlike the aim of science, i.e. certitude, philosophy in this era demands to go back on the meaning of existence, human conditions, and dignity or value which is identified as *existentialism*. It took stand against the 'depersonalizing' effects brought about by too much reliance on reason, which finds its comfort in science or objective truth. However, this 'turn' in philosophy did not appeal on a massive extent (except in the circle of philosophy or humanities), because many people were unwilling to give up the belief that science or a certain technique can be a solution to human adversaries. This is manifested in our dependence on technology. Nowadays, we are reliant on the forenamed in almost every aspect of our lives. For instance, in doing our school or office work, we simply go to internet to search

for answers without having us think and exert effort, which in the long run paralyzes our capacity for critical thinking. This and so many other depersonalizing effects brought about by our love for technology are slowly becoming immanent in our midst. Indeed, our use of technology greatly affects our attitudes and behaviors which changed the moral landscape of our time.

In relation to the discussion above, I will argue that the current ethical dilemmas we encounter can be understood and analyzed by exploring Immanuel Kant's *categorical imperative*. To do this, I will answer the following questions: (1) How did Kant pursue on laying the foundation of morals as an a priori? (2) What is the Categorical Imperative and how did it proceed as an a priori? (3) How can the categorical imperative be of relevance as a moral guide at present?

## Laying the Foundation of Morals

In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant seeks to find a universal and immutable law by which we can determine the morality of human actions and at the same time, to which we can anchor our moral life. It is upon this that Kant would later on build the concept of the categorical imperative. For the purpose of this paper, we shall look closely on the foundation of his ethics at large.

It is natural for man to desire to be happy. We may admit it or not, all of human actions aim at realizing this end. As Kant infers: "Without any view to duty all men have the strongest and deepest inclination to happiness, because in this idea all inclinations are summed up."<sup>1</sup> This statement reaffirms that happiness is no less than equivalent to self-satisfaction. However, men perceive happiness differently and associate it to distinct ends. Additionally, each person has their own way on how to achieve it. Hence, it has brought moral confusion on the notion happiness which explains why there are

conflicts and disunity among ethicists and moralists.

Kant particularly fought against utilitarianism. Utilitarianism was premised on the idea that one has to determine his action according to how it will yield to the benefit of the "greatest possible number of people". It advocates that what gives pleasure to most people, whose interests are affected by one's choice, should be preferred above all.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Kant viewed utilitarianism as material ethics because of its teleological character. Since utilitarianism's goal is the pleasure of man, it includes all objects that might satisfy his desires. No one could discourage nor obstruct man to attain his end and ideally others' as well. Hence, for utilitarianism, "the ends justify the means." This maxim means that as long as you attain your goal whether through good or bad action, it is justified.

Kant dismissed utilitarianism as a plausible basis of morality, because it cannot determine the moral import of an action. Its end is to acquire 'objects of pleasure' for self-sufficiency and happiness. However, these objects are contingent.<sup>3</sup> They are subject to change and even decay, which means that in the course of time, they can become latent and useless. Likewise, the attitude of man in relation to these goods can fluctuate and at worst, in some instances, the inclination towards these objects of pleasure fade away.<sup>4</sup> Hence, similar to the latter, emotions and inclinations cannot provide us moral standards.

With the aforementioned conditions concerning goods, it becomes apparent how detached these are to the subject i.e. they are only known to man through his experience. On the other hand, emotions and inclinations may not be detached from us yet we are spontaneously affected by the goods we are inclined to, as a natural reaction to whatever surround us or strong inclination towards things and the world at large. Hence, they are

not to be esteemed to furnish universality and permanence or immutability, which characterized Kant's notion of categorical imperative or the natural law that guides and directs our actions.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, it runs contradictory to utilitarianism, with qualities of temporality, particularity and contingency.

Kant suggested that we must find an absolute standard for morality. In fact, this matter is evident, yet often unrecognized and ignored. Since morality presupposes universality, it must be accessible to all men. This explains why Kant viewed morality as *a priori* i.e. can be known through reason alone.<sup>6</sup> Our moral compass must not come from experience, because experience *per se* does not give us universal knowledge only those which are particular and subjective. Correspondingly, our moral compass must reside within us and it is our task to make it actively present. This concept can be paralleled to the conscience of Christian faith which serves us our guide or where we based our notion of morality. On another note, morality presupposes immutability, which implies that a good determined by us should always be good in reference to time. For instance, you have seen a house in your neighborhood with doors open and with no one inside. Given the house is no ordinary but a mansion, thence with luxuries all over, you ask yourself: "Will I enter and get objects for myself?" The moral import of that action is certainly bad and will always be. This explains why the moral worth of our actions are *a priori*, hence universal and immutable.

In general, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* is an offshoot towards the categorical imperative of Kant. And for us to better understand the categorical imperative, it is but necessary that we follow Kant's point of departure.

## The Categorical Imperative

In the previous section, it was established that for Kant, moral knowledge is *a priori*. Additionally, for him, reason guides the will. In line with this, I will address this question: "What role does "will" play in the execution of moral actions?"

Kant states: "Nothing in the world – indeed nothing even beyond the world – can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a *good will*."<sup>7</sup> This implies that a will without conditions, exceptions, intentions, and qualifications can only be the real good. For instance, the will does not intend to help, love or give, more so, it does not aim to attain for the goods like the ends of utilitarianism. But it is the will as it is. Kant opines: "The good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes or because of its adequacy to achieve some proposed end; it is good only because it is willing, i.e it is good of itself."<sup>8</sup> Henceforth, when the will is bad, the act is immoral. In similar manner, when the will is good, the act is moral. There is no further qualification needed, there is no good act that is good at some moments and bad in another, inasmuch as the will cannot be good or bad at the same time.

Kant further characterized the will by saying that it must always be in accord with reason, as reason has its object the *a priori* practical truths.<sup>9</sup> The will alone cannot distinguish what is good from bad. It needs reason for guide and direction. Reason and will must work together. All moral actions proceed from the combined force of reason and will. With the demise of any of which, we cannot possibly account moral responsibility to a person.

Now, we turn our attention to how the will in itself can be a 'barometer' to determine the quality of this will. Kant first distinguished the will as categorical as opposed to hypothetical.

To say that the will is hypothetical means that it is teleological or that which has an end.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, to say that a will is categorical means that it is done according to what one thinks is “ought to be” done.<sup>11</sup> Like morality, the idea of duty is *a priori*. Kant characterized duty as emanating from a good will that is good in itself, that is, a will devoid of teleological potency. Kant proposed an ethics that is founded on the categorical imperative. For him, one’s duty should not be grounded on any cause or purpose, but for fulfilling that duty alone. In relation to this is the postulation of this question: “How do we know our duty or that which we ought to do?” Kant answered this through the idea of the ‘universal law’. As he said: “I should never act in such a way that I could not also will that my maxim should be a universal law.”<sup>12</sup> For instance, the idea of killing someone as a revenge to whatever destruction he/she has caused you is perceived as justifiable because you see that person as a threat to your well-being. With reference to this, Kant would posit if we were to allow killing as a form of revenge we then must allow it to be done by every one. Certainly, we would not want to see people killing each other as a revenge for we would be involved in a vicious cycle of killing, violence, and cruelty. Killing, in a sense, cannot be alleviated to a universal law.

Additionally, another variation of the categorical imperative is Kant’s idea of treating others as always ‘ends’ in themselves. At the very outset, Kant rejected the idea of acquiring objects to satisfy one’s pleasure and by which, in the utilitarian perspective, moral action can be determined. . On a similar level, to think of a person as a means to satisfy your pleasure is to reduce that person to any other objects. With reference to this, Kant will remind us that a

good will does not become good because of its end, even it satisfies the greatest possible number of people i.e. the maxim of utilitarianism.

## Conclusion

The categorical imperative of Kant presupposes freedom. We have the freedom to know and experience the natural law within us, which boisterously resonates what we ought to do. With this, Kant highlighted the significance of coming up with an objective underlying morality. However, it should be noted that he is not prescribing a kind of moral theory. Categorical imperative is accessible to every rational being, because first and foremost it is *a priori*.

Kant’s ‘deontological’ ethics will never come to passé, for it is making visible what is eternally present. The problems in morality at present are not really the lack of moral values, rather lies on our tendency to look ‘outside’ us i.e. from experience, causing us to end up conceptualizing our own ethics ourselves, which are often instructive and material. For Kant, the world is in a constant flux and so, to base our morals on what the world gives, is to live in contingency and temporality. As a result, our concept of the ‘good’ will always be limited and worse, unrefined.

At the end of the day, Kant reminds us that morality is a *personal endeavor*. We cannot rely on any socially constructed moral norms to such extent that we cannot rely on religion in living a moral life. It always goes back to how much effort we are willing to render in the service for good and truth.

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Ernst Behler (New York: Continuum, 1986), 60.

<sup>2</sup> The most prominent proponents of utilitarianism are J.S. Mill and Jeremy Bentham. See Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Moral and Legislation* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988); J.S Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government* (London: M. Dent and Sons, 1954).

<sup>3</sup> Kant, *op. cit.*, 64.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-66.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Emphasis mine. See particularly the first section on the *Transition from the Common Rational Knowledge of Morals to the Philosophical. Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 79.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-81.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

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