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# In Defense of the Hypothetical Imperative

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## IN DEFENCE OF THE HYPOTHETICAL IMPERATIVE \*

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*A Consideration of Kant's arguments against the hypothetical imperative in morality.*

In this paper I want to consider Kant's reasons for rejecting the hypothetical imperative as a form of moral judgement. As everyone knows, Kant insisted that moral precepts must be 'categorical imperatives' telling the agent what he should do whatever his desires or interests. These categorical imperatives Kant contrasted with rules of skill on the one hand and rules of prudence on the other, calling both hypothetical imperatives. Unlike a categorical imperative a hypothetical imperative operates only on the condition of certain desires or interests, as when e.g. the agent wishes to bisect a line and should take ruler and compasses, or when he is told what he should do for the sake of his happiness. That moral precepts cannot be hypothetical imperatives is the most basic tenet of Kant's moral philosophy, and it is accepted by many who, rejecting entirely his attempts to derive moral judgements from the mere form of law expressed in terms of a universally legislative will, would not dream of calling themselves Kantians in ethics. Where these non-Kantians nevertheless agree with Kant is in the conviction that a moral system cannot consist of a set of hypothetical imperatives telling the agent what he should do, or ought to do, only on condition of his having certain desires, or of certain things being to his advantage.

It is, I believe, a mistake to think that Kant has disposed of the hypothetical imperative, and I wish to consider the arguments that he brought against it. It will, perhaps, make things clearer if I explain what it is that I am ready to defend, so I shall first ask what is to be understood by a system of morality involving only hypothetical imperatives. What, indeed, is a hypothetical imperative?

At the outset we should distinguish two different interpretations of the expression 'hypothetical imperative', one having to do with the conditions of use of the word 'should', and other related terms such as 'ought', and the other having to do with practical reasoning.

Let us consider the first. When it is said that a certain agent 'should' do a particular thing (let us say that he should  $\phi$ ) the 'should' may, so far as our present usage goes, operate in two different ways, which we may call hypothetical and non-hypothetical. When we use 'should' 'hypothetically' we are saying what should be done by a man given that he has particular desires or interests, and our use of 'should' depends on such contingent factors. We are, perhaps, advising him, and we say what he should do on the assumption that he wants e.g. to get a particular job or marry a particular girl, where the action is ancillary to the supposed end. If, however, he tells us that we are mistaken, which might or might not be on account of his having relinquished the project, we have to take back what we said; our 'should' stands unsupported and in need of support. Similarly, if we say what a man should do for the sake of his happiness, and it appears that his interest does not lie where we thought it did, we must again withdraw our 'should' or find other ways of backing it. In both cases the use of 'should' is hypothetical, in the sense that it

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presupposes certain desires or interests, telling what should be done only on assumptions of this kind. In our language, this 'hypothetical' or conditional use of 'should' is the one most frequently found, and it can plausibly be argued that it is always present where advice is being given.<sup>1</sup> That we also have a different use of 'should' is nevertheless not to be denied, and we may freely grant that in moral contexts 'should', 'ought', and so on, are used in this second 'non-hypothetical' way. For in such contexts, where a moral ground is suggested as the reason why something should be done, we may say that a man should  $\phi$  without the implication that  $\phi$ -ing stands in an ancillary relation to his desires or interests. We may, of course, think that it does stand in such relation, as when e.g. we suppose that others care about moral ends such as the relief of suffering. If, however, it turns out that this is not the case, and perhaps we never even thought that it was, the 'should' does not stand 'unsupported and in need of support'. The moral 'should' — let us call it 'should<sub>m</sub>' — is adequately supported if the right kind of thing can be shown about the nature of the action, as e.g. that it deprives innocent people of life or liberty, and this without the special circumstances which might justify even that. What is not necessary is that we should show a connexion with the agent's desires or interests if we are correctly to maintain our use of 'should'; so that we have here a 'non-hypothetical' use of the word. Whether such 'non-hypothetical' usage is found only in moral contexts I would doubt. We seem to find it also e.g. in the enunciation of club rules or rules of etiquette, as e.g. 'Ladies should not be brought into the smoking room' or 'Invitations in the third person should be answered in the third person'. If the club secretary says to a member 'You should not bring ladies into the smoking room' he does not have to withdraw what he said, as not applying to this member, on finding that he is resigning tomorrow and will be delighted to be reputed an iconoclast. Nor do the rules of etiquette fail to apply to one who sensibly decides to ignore them. These examples suggest that it would be difficult to base very much on the fact of a non-hypothetical use of 'should' in any context, and one of the points I want to make is that its importance could easily be overestimated in ethics. I would like to suggest that the non-hypothetical use of 'should' is not very important, and that it is certainly far from giving us a categorical imperative in the Kantian sense. Nobody is going to argue that the rules of etiquette or club rules are Kantian categorical imperatives.

I shall now turn to the second interpretation of the expression 'hypothetical imperative' mentioned at the beginning of the paper. Whether or not a man employs hypothetical imperatives understood in this sense depends on the form of his practical reasoning; that is (as I am understanding it here) the grounds on which he is prepared to argue to conclusions expressing a practical decision such as 'I'll do it'. I shall say that a man takes sentences with 'should' or 'ought' as hypothetical imperatives in this second sense, so long as he argues 'So I'll  $\phi$ ' only when  $\phi$ -ing is shown as ancillary to something that he wants, or which it is in his interest to have. He is told, for instance, that he should not steal, although he could get away with stealing. He asks why he should not steal, and the other, unless he believes in a pure intuition about stealing, says something about the role of security of property in the life of the community, pointing out how much worse off people are when they must keep a constant guard on their possessions. The normal assumption is that the

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agent cares about how people in general fare in the community, and if he does honesty over property will have been related to the ends that he has. But if he does not care about such ends of morality as the general good he will, if acting only on hypothetical imperatives, say that he has no reason to refrain from stealing. He will not take the fact that he should<sub>m</sub> not steal as itself any reason for not stealing, any more than many of us take the fact that invitations in the third person should<sub>e</sub> (should from the point of view of etiquette) be answered in the same person as itself any reason for answering it thus. The 'should' in the rule of etiquette is treated by us as a hypothetical imperative in our second sense.

In the case of etiquette or club rules it is obvious that the non-hypothetical use of 'should' has resulted in the loss of the usual connexion between what one should do and what one has reason to do. Someone who objects that in the moral case a man cannot be justified in restricting his practical reasoning in this way, since every moral 'should' gives reasons for acting, must face the following dilemma. Either it is possible to create reasons for acting simply by putting together any silly rules and introducing a non-hypothetical 'should', or else the non-hypothetical 'should' does not necessarily imply reasons for acting. If it does not necessarily imply reasons for acting we may ask why it is supposed to do so in the case of morality. Why cannot the indifferent amoral man say that for him 'should<sub>m</sub>' gives no reason for acting, treating 'should<sub>m</sub>' as most of us treat 'should<sub>e</sub>'? Those who insist that 'should<sub>m</sub>' is categorical in this second 'reason giving' sense do not seem to realise that they never prove this to be so. They sometimes say that moral considerations 'just do' give reasons for acting, without explaining why some devotee of etiquette could not say the same about the rules of etiquette.

We have now distinguished two senses in which a moral system might be said to contain only hypothetical imperatives. First we would have such a system if the moral 'should' applied only in case the right connexion could be found with the agent's interests or desires. This is not, as we agreed, our actual usage, but that it is not seems to me to be quite unimportant. I believe that we could change to a hypothetical use of 'should' in moral contexts without destroying or even disrupting morality. To see how the word would then be used we may look to things as they are now in some other contexts. For instance, we may consider a group of people taking for granted a common allegiance to particular ends, but recognising that others outside the group do not necessarily want the same things. (We might think of some organized group such as a college or a team, or simply of a band of people who share certain aims, such as e.g. the prevention of war, or the preservation of the environment. They might even have very limited aims, such as preventing a crime, or robbing a bank.) Speaking within the group about the actions of members of the group they say that certain things should be done. Since the common aims are taken for granted it is not necessary to keep repeating 'because we want . . .' Nevertheless the 'should' is used hypothetically, since it is not used in connexion with those outside the group who are not supposed to have these things at heart. We do not say e.g. that a certain shopkeeper should move his premises because his business gets in the way of our projects, though we do say that we should see if we can induce him to do so. It would be like this with the moral 'should' if our moral system contained hypothetical imperatives in the first sense, and I want to say that

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it would not matter at all if we made this change in our usage. We should have lost nothing, except one among our many instruments for expressing a hostile attitude to persons outside the moral group. (We would no longer be able to say that they *shouldn't* act as they do.)

In the second sense a moral system contains only hypothetical imperatives in so far as moral considerations are considered to be reasons for acting only when related to the desires or interests of the agent. Kant thought that a man who acted only on such principles could not be a moral man, but this too I want to deny. I believe he could have moral principles and possess every virtue.

I am, of course, aware that this will seem an extraordinary suggestion. "How" it will be asked "can it possibly be thought that one who pursues only his own ends may yet have moral principles and be a man of moral virtue?" To answer, we must ask how our opponent is understanding the expression "pursuing his own ends"? If, as would be natural, he means "pursuing his own advantage" we should agree that such a man would not come under our description of a moral man. With this interpretation, however, we have gone beyond our original hypothesis, which was expressed in terms of a man's desires as well as his interests. "What a man desires" was taken quite generally to cover "what he wants", leaving scope for any desires however altruistic. A man may want, and want more than anything in the world, to help other people: and his hypothetical imperatives will then relate to such ends. Such a man would be one who could have the virtue of charity, in spite of the fact that his reasoning to a practical conclusion was always dependent on the contingent fact of his desires. How this would work out in the case of virtues such as honesty, and other forms of justice (in the wide traditional sense), is more problematic, since these virtues are not defined by their relation to an end. In saying that a man using only desire-dependent practical reasoning could have the virtue of honesty or justice I am thinking that he might believe that rules of honesty and justice were important for the common good and the protection of the weak, about which he cared. Moreover he wanted to live openly and in good faith with his neighbours, and therefore rejected dishonesty and injustice even where it seemed possible to conceal these things and nullify their bad effects.

Something should be said at this point about *inclination*. I have not been talking about practical reasoning related to a man's inclination but to the things that he wants. To get what one wants one has to go against inclination unless one's wants are very limited indeed; for instance if one wants to be a decent philosopher one has to overcome one's disinclination to get up in the morning and do some work, and it is with practical reasoning geared to such aims that moral practical reasoning would have to be compared. A morality of inclination would not get off the ground.

I apologise for so long a preamble to a paper that is meant to be about Kant, but it seemed to be essential to give some idea of the moral system I had in mind before asking whether Kant had brought any valid arguments against it. Let me now address myself to this problem. Kant believed that it was impossible to combine the concept of morality with that of the hypothetical imperative, implying that it was not the uninteresting matter of usage as I have represented it that leads to the non-hypothetical 'should' in moral contexts, and saying explicitly that one whose practical reasoning was of the form just described would be lacking the good will of

the truly moral man. As one who disagrees about this I must of course consider the various arguments given by Kant, and I have taken this opportunity, when I have the good fortune to be able to consult Professor Beck's judgement on the matter, to reconsider Kant's moral writings from this point of view, using the *Lectures on Ethics*, the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

Kant's objections to the hypothetical imperative as the form of moral judgement apparently fall into two groups, of which the second is much more important than the first. On the one hand he argues that the actions of one guiding his conduct entirely by hypothetical imperatives would be at best contingently in conformity with morality, that is with such things as charity and honesty. On the other he argues that the status of moral principles could not be secured under such a system. They would become merely contingent, lack universal validity or objective necessity, and fail to be the object of respect.

Kant's first argument seems to me to depend on his faulty theory of human action. What he believes is that there can be either material or formal motives of action. A man may do something either because he has a desire for some object and makes this thing his end (a material motive), or else because he does it for the sake of the moral law, when the motive is formal. In the latter case a feeling of respect does, indeed, arise in him, but without being the prior condition of the action. Now I am not attacking Kant because I have some Humean view of the possible genesis of human action, and I therefore propose to agree that a man may do something because he tells himself, or is convinced by Kant, that only thus will he be acting in conformity with reason, in adopting a maxim which could serve the universally legislative will. It is with the other side of Kant's theory of human action that I, like many others, and like Professor Beck himself, must quarrel. For Kant thought that when not acting out of respect for the moral law a man always followed egotistical or hedonistic desires. He is, in fact, a psychological hedonist, in respect of those actions dictated by hypothetical imperatives. Thus in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (translated L. W. Beck, p. 133) he says "All material practical principles are, as such, of one and the same kind and belong under the general principle of self-love or one's own happiness", while in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Part II. Introduction, Section II, he says that ethics cannot start from the ends which a man may propose to himself, since these are all "selfish". And in the early *Lectures on Ethics* he had given the maxim "If it harms thee to lie do not lie" as the principle of truth telling under a system of hypothetical imperatives. (There are many other examples of this sort in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*.)

It has been pointed out by Professor Beck (Introduction to *Immanuel Kant: Critique of Practical Reason*) that Kant's admittedly faulty theory of human action motivated by desire is not essential to his theory of ethics, and one must agree that in refuting the former one does not refute the latter. Nevertheless the faulty theory is essential to one of Kant's arguments against the possibility of a moral system containing only hypothetical imperatives. Given the premise assumed by Kant the point would indeed have been proved. For even if we allow, as Kant does in some place, that the pleasure or satisfaction to which desire determined action is directed may be of the most refined and altruistic kind it is impossible to make a

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system of psychological hedonism consistent with morality. If it really were true that in every case of doing A because one wanted B, what was wanted was more pleasure or less pain, no one would e.g. submit to torture rather than betray his friends, and a man whose desire was always a desire for pleasure or the avoidance of pain would certainly not possess the moral virtues if he acted on hypothetical imperatives related to these ends. If, however, we abandon these theories of human action, which we are in no position to support, and allow as ends the things that seem to be ends, including such things as the good of others, why should we deny virtue to one whose desires are in conformity with virtue not contingently but as directed to the ends internal to the virtue concerned? There is all the difference in the world between wanting another person's happiness for the sake of one's own and simply wanting it. Similarly there is all the difference between wanting to be honest because honesty is the best policy and wanting it on account of the importance of honesty in the life of the community of which one is a part, and because of one's concern for the common good. Kant's argument that a system of hypothetical imperatives would produce at most a contingent conformity to morality seems to depend wholly on a theory of human nature which prevented him from considering just that set of ends which would give true virtue rather than accidental conformity. I want, therefore, to dismiss this particular set of arguments as depending on a false premise.

Let us turn, then, to the second and more central argument, which is about the status that moral rules would have under a system of hypothetical imperatives, and the status they must have in order to be moral rules. Kant admits that in hypothetical imperatives we do indeed have necessary principles, since they tell us what must be done in order to achieve our ends. But since the end is one that the subject *may or may not have* (a contingent end) the necessity is a merely subjective, conditional necessity. This I would accept. It seems to me that there is no way of going behind the last end given in the chain of reasons for doing an action. Whereas Kant, however much he does, in places, allow for moral ends, such as the altruistic end, insists that the adoption of the end is itself something dictated by reason. So he says, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, (Part II section 30)" . . . beneficence is the maxim to make the happiness of others an end for oneself, and the duty of beneficence involves the subject's being constrained by his reason to adopt this maxim as a universal law". That there are moral ends he agrees, but insists that the end is one that the agent has a duty to adopt. I know that in denying this I am saying something that will seem paradoxical to most people. My own view is that while there are ends within ethics which one should<sub>m</sub> adopt (as e.g. that one's children get a good education) there are others which rather define morality. And just as there are difficulties about saying that one 'ought' to be moral, so there are difficulties about saying that one 'ought' to take account of the general good. For either the 'ought' means 'morally ought' or 'ought from a moral point of view' or else it does not. If it does we have a tautological principle. If it does not the problem is to know what is being said. By hypothesis a prudential 'ought' is not intended here, or one related to others of the agent's contingent ends. Nor do we have the 'ought' and 'ought not' operating with the system of etiquette, or some system of institutional rules. This 'ought' — the one in the sentence 'One ought to be moral' — is supposed to be free floating and unsubscripted, and I have never



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found anyone who could explain the use of the word in such a context. (They are apt to talk about the expressing of resolves, or of decisions, but it is then not clear why we need the 'ought' terminology when 'I resolve' and 'I've decided' are already in use.) My own conclusion is that 'One ought to be moral' makes no sense at all unless the 'ought' has the moral subscript, giving a tautology, or else relates morality to *some* other system such as prudence or etiquette. I am, therefore putting forward quite seriously a theory that disallows the possibility of saying that a man ought (free unsubscripted 'ought') to have ends other than those he does have; e.g. that the uncaring, amoral man ought to care about the relief of suffering or the protection of the weak. In my view we must start from the fact that some people do care about such things, and even devote their lives to them; they may therefore talk about what should be done presupposing such common aims. These things are necessary, but only subjectively and conditionally necessary, as Kant would put it.

Kant would of course object that I am treating men as if, in the army of duty, they were volunteers, and this is exactly my thought. Why does Kant so object to the idea that those who are concerned about morality are joining together with like minded people to fight against injustice and oppression, or to try to relieve suffering, and that they do so because, caring about such things, they are ready to volunteer in the cause? Kant says that there is a kind of conceit involved in such a conception. Why does he think this? He supposes that in so viewing the matter (in seeing ourselves as volunteers) we are forgetting our nature as human beings, members of the phenomenal as well as the noumenal world, whose will may be determined by the moral law but also by desire, so that we do not automatically act as a being with a holy will would act, and are beings for whom the dictates of reason take the form of a command. Let us agree that a human being does not necessarily have moral ends, and that even when he does his inclination may be stronger than his moral resolves. Both of these things being true a man could be mistaken either in supposing that his concern for others could not fail, or in supposing that by merely following his inclinations he could serve moral causes with no need for resolution or self discipline. We have already pointed out that a morality of hypothetical imperatives is not a morality of inclination; resolution and self discipline being at least as necessary to achieve moral ends as to achieve anything else. So let us consider the other suggestion, that the supporter of the hypothetical imperative is failing to recognise that the desires of even the most moral of men could always change. This charge should be denied. One who supports the hypothetical imperative does not forget that desires might change; he has simply given up trying to deal, in advance, with such a contingency by saying to himself that he would still be under command. That this seems hard to accept is the fact that lies, I think, at the heart of Kantianism in ethics, and to the neo-Kantianism of those who accept his strictures on the hypothetical imperative though rejecting the rest of his theory. It will seem to many impossible that one should have nothing to say about the case where moral concerns have vanished, except of course, to note the character of the man concerned, and in the case of other people, to take what measures one can to stop them from doing harm. Perhaps the greatest fear is of a change in one's self; one wants as it were to make sure one is stuck with the idea of acting morally whatever one's concerns have become. The move betrays a lack of

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confidence which oddly does not so often trouble people when their devotion is to causes other than those of morality. So far as I know the people of Leningrad were not troubled, during the terrible years of siege, by the thought that their allegiance to the city was only *contingent*, or that they were dependent on the likewise contingent devotion of the other citizens. Perhaps one should be less troubled than one is by fear of defection from the moral cause; perhaps one would even have less reason to fear it, if the army of duty were thought of as an army of volunteers. For many people feel uneasy about the things that are said about the authority and binding force of morality, fearing, like Thrasymachus, that they may be being tricked. In my view their scepticism is well grounded, since I believe that many of the statements with which people would bolster the 'authority' of 'the moral law' are in fact meaningless, unless viewed as expressions of the *feeling* that we have about morality. As stating what we tend to feel they make sense; taken in any other way they do not.

These suggestions are, of course, directly relevant to Kant's arguments against the hypothetical imperative, for the same problems arise about the meaning of the things that he says. What, for instance, does it mean to say that moral rules are categorical commands? In the first place they are not commands at all, neither commands of men nor commands of God; or rather if they are commands of God it is not as commanded by God that they are in Kant's sense categorical commands. (This he says explicitly.) What we actually have are rules of conduct adopted by certain societies, and individuals within these societies; and Kant is saying that these rules are universally valid. But when we put it this way, in terms of rules, the difficulty of understanding the notion of universal validity is apparent. (It can no longer mean that everyone is commanded, which shows that there is some point in denying Kant the picturesque language of commands.) Kant's thought seems to be that moral rules are universally valid in that they are inescapable, that no one can contract out of morality, and above all that no one can say that as he does not happen to care about the ends of morality, morality does not apply to him. This thought about inescapability is very important, and we should pause to consider it. It is perhaps Kant's most compelling argument against the hypothetical imperative, and the one that may make Kantians of us all.

There is, of course, a sense in which morality is inescapable. Consider, for instance, moral epithets such as 'dishonest', 'unjust', 'uncharitable'; these do not cease to apply to a man because he is indifferent to the ends of morality: they may indeed apply to him because of his indifference. He is judged by the criteria of morality when moral character is in question, and Kant is indeed right in saying that these criteria are independent of his desires. (*Contrast* a word such as 'rash'). No one can escape the application of the moral terms by pleading his indifference. Nor can he escape them by turning to ways of life in which he can be counted as being neither morally good nor morally bad, as he can escape being a good or a bad husband by simply not marrying, or a good or bad carpenter by refusing to take up the tools. In this sense, then, morality is inescapable, but this can be accepted, and insisted on, by Kant's opponent, the defender of the hypothetical imperative. The latter may also agree that the application of such epithets will often be the vehicle for the expression of opposition, disgust or hatred. It had already been agreed that

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with our present 'non-hypothetical' use of 'should' in moral contexts the application of the moral 'should' is also inescapable. But someone who thinks that significant concessions have now been made to Kant must answer the following question. Has anything been said about the inescapability of morality which could not also be said about the inescapability of etiquette? For just as a man is immoral if he does certain things, despite his indifference to the nature and result of his actions, so he is rude or unmannerly, or one who does what is 'not done', whatever his views about etiquette. Since no one says that the rules of etiquette are categorical imperatives the task must be to explain the additional inescapability belonging to morality.

We must return, therefore, to the difficulty of discovering what Kant can have meant by saying that moral rules have objective necessity, are categorical commands, are universally valid, or are binding upon the will of every free agent. Nothing that we have yet considered has given Kant what he wants, and one cannot, I think, avoid the following conclusion. Kant's argument that moral rules have a peculiar and dignified status depends wholly upon his attempt to link moral action with rationality through the mere concept of the form of law and the principle of universalisability, as interpreted by him. In acting morally Kant thinks that we do as reason dictates. In acting immorally we are acting irrationally, and if this is not how Kant puts it, it is what he must show in order to make his point. If it could be proved, then any man, whatever his desires, could be shown to have reason to act morally, since one has reason to do what it is rational to do. The difficulty, as everyone knows, is to accept Kant's arguments purporting to show that morally bad actions are those whose maxim could not belong to a universally legislative will, and moreover that action according to such maxims is irrational action. These difficulties have been argued *ad nauseam*, and I shall not repeat the arguments here. All I would claim to have shown is that no one who rejects Kant's attempts to derive morality from reason has been given any reason to reject the hypothetical imperative in morals. It is commonly believed that even if Kant has not shown the connexion between reason and morality he has at least destroyed the hypothetical imperative. I have urged that, on the contrary, there is no valid argument against the hypothetical imperative to be found in Kant should the argument from reason fail.

### FOOTNOTES

1. This would imply that moral ADVICE can be given only to one interested in morality. I believe this to be correct, but it is not essential to my thesis.