THE HYPOTHETICAL IMPERATIVE

COMMENTATORS on Kant’s theory of practical reason have devoted much attention to his concept of the Categorical Imperative and its several formulations. Comparatively little has been said about the principle which I shall call “the Hypothetical Imperative.” An understanding of this principle, however, is essential for an undistorted view of Kant’s theory. Neglect of the Hypothetical Imperative results in failure to see both the striking parallels and the important differences between Kant’s account of moral reasoning and his account of prudential reasoning. My objects in this paper are, first, to sketch an interpretation of the principle I refer to as “the Hypothetical Imperative”; second, to explain a sense in which it is a hypothetical imperative, though a very special one; and, finally, to explain why, despite the similarities between the Categorical Imperative and the Hypothetical Imperative, Kant assigned a special sublimity to actions based on the Categorical Imperative.¹

I

The Hypothetical Imperative may be expressed provisionally as follows: If a person wills an end and certain means are necessary to achieve that end and are within his power, then he ought to will those means. Kant never explicitly states the imperative in this (“ought”) form, but he does mention “the imperative which commands the willing of the means to him who wills the end” as a principle presupposed in both imperatives of skill and imperatives of prudence.² Moreover, that there is such an imperative for men is implied by his repeated contention that whoever wills an end,

¹ This paper owes much to the lectures of John Rawls at Harvard in 1962. In addition I have received helpful comments from several sources, including John G. Bennett, Sharon Hill, and the editors of the Philosophical Review.
if he is fully rational, wills also the necessary means to that end which are in his power. For to say that a principle is an imperative for men is simply to say that it is a rational principle for men to follow expressed in one of those special forms (for example, "One ought . . .") in which rational principles are appropriately addressed to imperfectly rational wills—that is, to those who can follow them but who might fail to do so. The Hypothetical Imperative merely expresses what Kant regards as a fundamental rational principle in the "ought" form appropriate for us as imperfectly rational beings.

The Hypothetical Imperative, as I understand it, is a principle of conduct and not simply an explication of what it is to will an end. It states how men ought to act, even though sometimes, irrationally, they fail to comply. Often, however, Kant is understood in a quite different way. The slogan "Who wills an end, wills the means" is construed not as a principle of rational conduct but as an analytic truth concerning the concept of willing an end. On this reading Kant's point is that anyone who wills an end necessarily does will the means. No one is to be condemned for irrationally failing to will the means to his ends; for such failure is conceptually impossible. This common (though, I think, mistaken) interpretation is not a stupid one; some passages do suggest it. Nevertheless, I believe for several reasons that it cannot represent Kant's dominant line of thought. First, Kant usually states the allegedly analytic proposition in a qualified way that shows that what is intended is "If a person is fully rational and wills an end, then he wills the necessary means." Consider, for example:

Whoever wills the end, so far as reason has decisive influence on his action, wills also the indispensably necessary means to it that lie in his power [my italics].
Whoever wills the end wills also (necessarily according to reason) the only means to it which are in his power [my italics].

---

3 *Groundwork*, pp. 84-85 (417).
4 *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by L. W. Beck, p. 35. Kant's words are: "wer Zweck will, will auch (der Vernunft gemass notwendig) die einzigen Mittel, die dazu in seiner Gewalt sind." Paton's translation, I think, is misleading at this point. See *Groundwork*, p. 85 (418).
THE HYPOTHETICAL IMPERATIVE

If I fully will the effect, I must also will the action necessary to produce it [my italics].

Since “will” is sometimes identified with “practical reason,” “fully will” may mean “choose as a completely rational and informed person”; but, in any case, “fully will” contrasts with simply “will” and thus the last quotation does not deny that one can will an end without willing the necessary means in his power. Second, Kant explicitly refers to “the imperative which commands him who wills the end to will the means,” and there could be no such command or imperative, by Kant’s doctrines, if failure to conform were impossible. Third, if it is a necessary truth that anyone who wills an end also wills the necessary means, then there is no imperative “Whoever wills an end, ought to will the necessary means”; and, if this is so, then there is no valid way of justifying particular hypothetical imperatives. For typically a particular hypothetical imperative is of the form, “If one wills A (a certain end), then one ought to will B (a certain means),” and such “ought” propositions cannot be supported by empirical facts (for example, B is a necessary means to A) alone. A general “ought” premise, the Hypothetical Imperative, is also required.

Now assuming that I am right in thinking of the Hypothetical Imperative as a principle of conduct, what is its practical import? A partial answer has already been suggested: the Hypothetical Imperative serves as a general, though rarely articulated, premise in arguments for various nonmoral “ought” judgments. The pattern of such arguments would be as follows:

1. Whoever wills an end also wills the sole means which are in his power if he is fully rational.
2. Whoever wills an end ought to will the sole means which are within his power. Or, in other words, if a person wills an end and certain means are necessary to achieve that end and are within his power, then he ought to will those means.
3. A is the sole means to B and is generally available (within everyone’s power).

---

5 Ibid., p. 85 (417).
6 Groundwork, p. 86 (419).
THOMAS E. HILL, JR.

Therefore,
(4) If one wills $B$, one ought to will $A$.
(5) $Q$ (a person) wills $B$.
Therefore,
(6) $Q$ ought to will $A$.

(1) is a proposition which Kant held to be analytic; (2) is the Hypothetical Imperative, an expression of (1) in imperative form; (3) and (5) must express empirical facts; and (4) is the typical form of Kant's particular hypothetical imperatives. Used in an argument of this sort, the Hypothetical Imperative is an essential step in the support of particular hypothetical imperatives. Together with certain empirical facts it backs up particular judgments, such as "I ought (to will) to get new tires for my car" and "I ought (to will) to lose a few pounds." One way of failing to obey the Hypothetical Imperative, then, is to fail to do what can be inferred that one ought to do, given the Hypothetical Imperative and the facts about one's ends and the necessary means to them.

The Hypothetical Imperative can also be viewed in another way, apart from its role in arguments for particular hypothetical imperatives. That is, the Hypothetical Imperative can function as a general proscription of a kind of duplicity that we associate with neurotic behavior. What it condemns is the irrational failure to follow through on our own morally permissible projects. What it prescribes is that we decide to take the requisite steps to achieve goals that we have already decided to pursue. The paradigm of a person who offends against the imperative is the man who continues to declare himself for a goal, takes many steps toward it, and half hopes to achieve it even though he systematically refuses to take some means obviously necessary to reach the goal. For example, a man solemnly resolves to lose ten pounds of excess weight, buys smaller clothes, weighs himself each day hopefully, but rarely chooses the lighter meals that are required to do the job.

To clarify this second function of the Hypothetical Imperative, it may be useful to consider some natural objections to it. Consider, for example, the following: "A person typically has many desires
and aims at the same time, and an act that is necessary as a means
to the satisfaction of one of these may lead to the frustration of
many others. It is often foolish, therefore, to take the means to
an end one has even if it is the only means within one’s power.
The cost may simply be too high.” To meet this objection we
need to make clearer what the Hypothetical Imperative pre-
scribes. It does not say that one should take the necessary means
to every end that one has, still less that one must take the requisite
steps to satisfy every desire. The imperative prescribes only the
means necessary to ends that one wills. To will an end, I take it,
is not simply to have an indeterminate goal which one hopes
somehow to reach; it involves deciding, resolving, or setting oneself
to go for the goal. A fully rational being, presumably, would will
an end only after duly reflecting on what is required to achieve
it, weighing the cost, and so forth. Thus the principle that a
fully rational being would accept, stated more completely, is
(roughly) to do whatever is a necessary means within his power
to an end that, after due deliberation, he actually sets himself
to pursue.7 The person who offends against the principle, then,
is not in general the person who lets his opportunity pass to achieve
some ideal goal or to satisfy some desire; it is the man who
deliberates carefully and resolves, in the light of all relevant
circumstances, to pursue a certain goal but who balks when the
anticipated means present themselves.

Another natural objection to the Hypothetical Imperative is
this. “The Hypothetical Imperative seems to say that if one has
already decided to pursue an end, then one must carry through
with the necessary means. The dieter’s neurotic balking at the
means to his goal does seem irrational; but is it always unre-
asonable to change one’s mind after one has decided to pursue
a goal? Suppose a man decides to become a doctor and attends
a year of medical school. The second and third years of training
are necessary means to his end, but he has doubts about his goal
and suspects that he would rather be a philosopher. The Hypo-

7 Strictly speaking, the principle is to will the necessary means, not to take
them or to do what is required. We can assume for all practical purposes,
however, that anyone who wills some means within his power also takes those
means. Thus I shall not always state the principle in the strict way.
The Hypothetical Imperative seems to demand that he finish his training regardless of his doubts simply because he earlier decided to become a physician. But, surely, there need be no irrationality in his anticipated change of profession.” This objection, I suspect, is a result of a too simple identification of “willing” with “deciding.” If we understand “willing an end” as simply “deciding to pursue an end,” then this suggests that willing an end takes place at a rather specific time and then is done. Thus the precept “If one wills an end, one ought to will the means” becomes “If the act of willing the end has taken place, then one must decide to take the necessary steps to implement it.” Reconsideration and changes of goal are prohibited once the required event, willing the end, has taken place. Now, although willing is in some respects like deciding, the suggestion that it is an act or even that it takes place at a specific time may be misleading. Willing is in some respects like wanting and believing; whether one wills an end is determined by a complex pattern of thoughts, actions, and dispositions over a period of time. Because of this, the precept “If one wills an end, one ought to will the means” might be better rendered as “If one has decided to pursue a certain end and remains constant in his commitment to it, then one ought to will the necessary means within his power.” This expresses the idea of “willing an end” in a clumsy and imperfect way but it avoids the suggestion that it refers to a momentary occurrence.

Now, with the last point in mind, we can answer our second objection to the Hypothetical Imperative. The objection stems from the idea that the Hypothetical Imperative demands that one carry through on every project on which one at some time or other decided. But this is not what the Hypothetical Imperative requires. If “willing an end” is understood as I have suggested, then the Hypothetical Imperative demands only that a person follow through in practice the commitments he has made and does not withdraw. It does not prohibit reconsideration but only the irrational refusal to implement decisions that one continues to reaffirm. To the man who doubts his earlier decision, it says, in effect: “Face the fact that you cannot reach your goal without these means—either give up your resolve to
reach the goal or decide to take the means.” What the Hypothetical Imperative condemns is not the changing of one’s aims; it is the irrationality of continuing to profess, work toward, and hope for certain ends even though one is unwilling to take some essential means to realize them.

A third objection might be put as follows: “The use of certain means is immoral; or, even if there are some ends that would justify any means (not Kant’s view), at least some of our lesser ends do not warrant the means necessary to them. Sometimes the moral thing to do is to let the only chance to achieve our ends pass because the ends are of too little value to justify our taking the shocking means required to reach them. On some occasions to will the necessary means to one’s ends is immoral.” Now it is abundantly clear that Kant would not condone, and still less encourage, a person to achieve his ends by taking means contrary to the Categorical Imperative, even if the ends could be achieved in no other way. What is perhaps not so clear is how this attitude squares with what he says about the rationality of taking the necessary means to one’s ends. It is tempting to say that the Hypothetical Imperative was intended to express only a prima-facie requirement of rationality and that the Categorical Imperative was meant to take precedence in case of conflict. This way of putting the matter, however, is unsatisfactory. For imperatives are supposed to tell us that certain acts are necessary, not merely that there is a prima-facie case for them; and, as principles of reason, imperatives should never fall into an irreconcilable conflict. That is, one imperative should never demand unequivocally that we do something prohibited unequivocally by another imperative. A rational man should not have to choose between obeying one objective principle or another.

The resort to prima-facie requirements, moreover, is unnecessary. The proper reply to the third objection is to point out that it wrongly assumes that, unless qualified, the Hypothetical Imperative sometimes prescribes unequivocally that a person take immoral means. The Hypothetical Imperative does in fact imply that there is some irrationality in the man who remains committed to a certain end but nevertheless refuses to
THOMAS E. HILL, JR.

take the necessary but immoral means to it. This does not mean, however, that the Hypothetical Imperative demands that he use the immoral means; for there is another alternative. He can abandon the end. In so far as this remains a possibility, what the Hypothetical Imperative prescribes, in effect, is "Take the necessary means or else give up the end." If we assume with Kant that moral rules are backed by a Categorical Imperative which expresses an unqualified requirement of reason, then the rational man will have to give up his ends when they can be achieved only by immoral means. The Hypothetical Imperative poses an alternative, and in some cases the Categorical Imperative eliminates one of these options.

To illustrate, consider the Nazi officer who must kill thousands of prisoners in order to advance himself in the party, an end to which he is fanatically committed. He balks, failing to release the gas, even though he remains firmly set in his ambition and he knows that the killing is necessary as a means. According to the Hypothetical Imperative, the man is irrational; for he fails to take the necessary means to his ends. He could avoid that irrationality by going ahead with the killing, but then he would run afoul of the Categorical Imperative, another principle of rationality. The only rational course, then, is to abandon the end of advancement in the party. In this way he can completely satisfy the requirements of both rational principles.

This reply depends, of course, upon Kant's belief that the use of immoral means is contrary to a categorical imperative. A categorical imperative, by definition, is an unconditional principle of rationality; and nothing would count as such a principle if it resulted in irreconcilably conflicting commands. Thus, while it is notoriously difficult to show that there is a categorical imperative behind our moral beliefs, it is not difficult to show that, if there is one, it will never both demand the pursuit of an end and yet prohibit the only means to it. If, as Kant supposed, morality is rational, it does not lead to irresolvable moral dilemmas. Thus when the Hypothetical Imperative confronts us with a choice of taking certain means or abandoning an end, we know that the Categorical Imperative (if there is one) will condemn only one option, not both. The first principle of a rational
morality would not prohibit us from satisfying other principles of rationality.

Kant apparently believed that a person can always abandon his ends when they require immoral means, but this belief is not presupposed in our reply to the third objection. We must take for granted that a fully rational person can give up his ends when rational principles so direct, but we need not assume that everyone is always capable of complete rationality. If a compulsive person were unable to abandon an end when he saw that it required immoral means, he would simply be unable to act rationally. He might still refuse to take the means but without making the adjustments in his life plans which the Hypothetical Imperative demands. In such a case he would demonstrate a capacity for satisfying one principle of rationality, the Categorical Imperative, but not both. Kant and modern psychologists would

---

8 The idea that a person can always abandon his ends when they require immoral means, I take it, is a consequence of Kant’s radical notion of free will. To will something is not the same as to desire it. For our desires are given, so to speak, but Kant says that the distinctive feature of humanity is the power to set oneself an end, any end whatsoever (The Doctrine of Virtue, trans. by Mary Gregor [New York, 1964], p. 51 [390]). Again, Kant says that “adoption of any end whatsoever is an act of freedom on the agent’s part, not an operation of nature” (ibid., pp. 43-44 [384-385]). Thus no matter how much a person may desire an end, he still has the ability not to pursue it if doing so is immoral.

An apparent counterexample arises from Kant’s claim that all men have happiness as their end by “natural necessity” (Groundwork, p. 83 [416]). Happiness, on Kant’s view, is not a particular end (like winning a race) but an indeterminate idea of the realization of all one’s ends. Since one’s ends do not form a clearly understood or even coherent set, there is rarely, if ever, an occasion to say that a particular act is a necessary means to happiness. Prudential imperatives give only “counsel,” rather than definite requirements, and often we can come as close to that amorphous ideal of happiness by replacing our specific ends as by pursuing them. Still, if we understand “happiness” in an ordinary way, there may be times when unless we do something immoral we shall lose all hope of happiness. Then if we cannot abandon the end of happiness, we cannot satisfy both the Categorical and the Hypothetical Imperative. Faced with this problem, we might salvage Kant’s main points by making a distinction between having an end and willing an end. All men, one might say, have happiness as their end—that is, desire it—by natural necessity; but it is contrary to the doctrine of free will to say that men on all occasions necessarily will happiness as their end—that is, set themselves to pursue it.
no doubt disagree about the extent to which we are capable of rational action, but that is not the issue. The answer to the third objection is that the prescriptions of the Hypothetical Imperative are always compatible with those of a rational morality, not that we always have the psychological capacity to satisfy both.

II

When Kant introduced the distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives, he was apparently thinking of the contrast between the Categorical Imperative and particular hypothetical imperatives, such as "If you aim to get well, you ought to take this medicine." Nevertheless, it is clear that he would classify what I call "the Hypothetical Imperative" as an imperative and as hypothetical. I shall try to explain briefly why this is so.

The idea of an imperative presupposes Kant's distinction between objective and subjective principles. A subjective principle is a principle on which some person (or "subject") acts. Thus both "Seek peace" and "Annihilate your enemies" are subjective principles. An objective principle is one which every rational person would follow if he were acting in a completely rational way. It is not, of course, a principle that all rational persons happen, by some coincidence, to follow; it is a principle they adopt because they are rational. Whether anyone actually acts on a principle is irrelevant to whether it is an objective principle. The supreme moral principle, for example, is held to be an objective principle even though Kant says that it is uncertain whether anyone ever acted entirely on that principle. The same principle can be both objective and subjective. In fact, whenever a person acts on a rational principle, his subjective principle is also objective.

Objective principles can be stated either in a general way applicable to all rational beings (including the "divine will")

---

9 *Groundwork*, p. 81 (413).
10 *Groundwork*, p. 75 (407).
or in a way appropriate only for “imperfect wills” (such as we have). When objective principles are stated generally, they can be expressed with the words “to do . . .,” “to avoid . . .,” and the like, as in “The over-riding principle is to preserve the peace.” The principle of autonomy is stated in this way: “Never to choose except in such a way that in the same volition the maxims of your choice are also present as universal law.”

When expressed in the general way applicable to the divine will, objective principles will not include the terms “ought,” “obligation,” and “duty.” Imperatives, however, express objective principles (or applications of these) less generally, in a way appropriately addressed only to imperfectly rational wills. These are the wills of persons who can follow the principles but might not. Kant’s idea is that if a person necessarily conforms to a principle it is inappropriate to say that he ought to do so, that it is his duty, and so forth. Human beings, however, always have imperfect wills. Because they are rational and have free will, they can follow objective principles; because they also have sensuous desires, they might not. This is true of the best men along with the worst. The human condition, as it were, guarantees that imperative forms of expressing objective principles are never inappropriate for us.

Kant’s imperatives should not be identified with the class of linguistic expressions that serve to convey the idea that something ought to be done or avoided. Imperatives, in Kant’s terminology, are not simply “ought” sentences or statements, nor are they (like ordinary commands) merely complex speech acts. They are, rather, formulae that express objective principles (or principles derivable from these). In order to state an imperative it is necessary, but not sufficient, to use “ought” or some equivalent. One must also formulate a principle, or an application of a principle, to which any fully rational person would conform. That is, imperatives are formulae which present principles that actually are objective; they are not merely expressions through

---

11 This point I take from Rawls.
12 *Groundwork*, p. 108 (440).
13 *Groundwork*, p. 81 (414).
which someone purports to state an objective principle.\textsuperscript{14} The category of imperatives, then, is no more a linguistic (or grammatical) category than is that of true indicative sentences.

To say that a given principle is an imperative, then, is to make a claim about its rationality as well as its form and linguistic propriety. That is, a principle is an imperative for human beings if, but only if, it is appropriate to express the principle to human beings in “ought” form and the principle is one (or the application of one) that any fully rational person would follow. Now the principle which the Hypothetical Imperative expresses, stated generally, is “to will the necessary means to one’s ends if they are within one’s power.” There is no impropriety in addressing this principle to ourselves in “ought” form in so far as we can follow the principle but might not. Any fully rational person would follow the principle, according to Kant, for the concept of a fully rational person is, at least in part, the concept of a person who does not hesitate to take the requisite steps toward the ends which he affirms.\textsuperscript{15} If so, it follows that the principle is an objective principle and its expression in “ought” form, which I have called “the Hypothetical Imperative,” is an imperative.

To explain why the Hypothetical Imperative is a hypothetical imperative is more difficult. So far it seems to share the most striking features of Kant’s conception of the Categorical Imperative: it is a principle that any fully rational person would follow, it expresses a stringent rather than a prima-facie requirement of reason, and to establish its rationality we do not need any contingent premises about what human beings desire. Moreover,

\textsuperscript{14} This point makes clear some of Kant’s remarks which otherwise would be inexplicable. E.g., if an imperative were simply an utterance which purports to express an objective principle, then the question “How are imperatives possible?” would be pointless. See \textit{Groundwork}, p. 84 (417). Again, at several points Kant implies that it is a formidable task to establish that a certain principle, the principle of autonomy, “is an imperative for human beings” (\textit{Groundwork}, pp. 86-87, 92, 108 [419-420, 425, 440]). If principles could be made into imperatives simply by expressing them in an “ought” formula, there would be no problem. In fact, Kant paraphrases the statement “this rule (the principle of autonomy) is an imperative” with the words “that is, . . . the will of every rational being is necessarily bound to the rule as a condition” (\textit{Groundwork}, p. 108 [440]).

\textsuperscript{15} See \textit{Groundwork}, pp. 84-85 (417-418).
the Hypothetical Imperative does not, like particular hypothetical imperatives, "declare a possible action to be practically necessary as a means to the attainment of something else that one wills (or that one may will)." The Hypothetical Imperative is a general principle that does not mention particular ends or means; it tells us only that we ought to will the means to our ends, whatever these may be. If the Hypothetical Imperative is hypothetical, then, there must be some more general account of what makes imperatives hypothetical.

A tempting but inadequate proposal is that hypothetical imperatives can be distinguished from categorical ones by form. Thus the distinctive form of a fully stated hypothetical imperative would be "If one wants (seeks, and so forth) A, then one ought to do X." The typical form of a categorical imperative, in contrast, would be simply "One ought to do X." A major problem with this way of distinguishing the types of imperatives is that the distinction does not coincide, as Kant intended, with the distinction between moral and nonmoral imperatives. Moral imperatives are supposed to be categorical and nonmoral ones hypothetical. But consider the following. The principle "If you want to kill someone for money, you ought to restrain yourself" has some credibility as a moral one; but it is hypothetical in form. Similarly, the supposedly moral imperative in Kant's example concerning a man tempted to suicide might be expressed: "If one wants to end one's life merely to minimize one's pains, one ought to resist the temptation." Again, a nonmoral imperative might be expressed in categorical form: for example, "One ought to treat a headache with aspirin." One might argue that after proper analysis this would be stated in hypothetical form, but it would not be easy to say what constitutes a "proper analysis" without begging the question at issue. The examples just considered have been particular imperatives, but the same point can be made with Kant's most general ones. What Kant calls "the Categorical Imperative," for instance, can be stated in the form: "If you

---

16 *Groundwork*, p. 82 (414).
want to do something $X$ but cannot will acting on that want to become a universal law, then you ought not to do $X$.” Again, the Hypothetical Imperative can be expressed in categorical form: “You ought always to take the necessary, available means to your ends.” The natural linguistic form of an imperative may provide a good clue concerning whether it is hypothetical or categorical, but it does not adequately reflect the distinction Kant wanted to make.

Again, one might think that hypothetical imperatives are distinguished from categorical imperatives by the fact that in the absence of empirical data they give no substantive prescriptions about what one ought to do. Particular hypothetical imperatives tell us the means to our ends, or at least they are based on such information; and, though the Hypothetical Imperative neither gives nor is based upon empirical data, it yields no advice until information about particular means and ends is supplied. The Categorical Imperative, by contrast, is supposed to be an a priori principle which is the foundation of a purely rational system of ethical principles. It may seem, then, that the Categorical Imperative is distinct from the Hypothetical Imperative in that it can give us substantive commands which are not based on empirical facts and so hold regardless of empirical conditions. Kant does sometimes suggest this contrast; but it is not one to which he consistently held, and on closer view it appears highly implausible. Kant’s own examples of the application of the Categorical Imperative usually, if not always, rely upon empirical information. Moreover, even if the general principles in his *Metaphysics of Morals* could be derived a priori, they could hardly be applied in any real case without empirical information about the case at hand. One cannot follow the principle to promote the ends of others, for example, without knowing what these are.

What is needed is a general account of hypothetical imperatives which will appropriately classify principles of different forms and levels of generality as hypothetical. Each of the following,

---

18 See Jonathan Harrison, “Kant’s Examples of the First Formulation of the Categorical Imperative,” *Philosophical Quarterly*, VII (Jan. 1957). Also consider Kant’s arguments for the principles of duty in *The Doctrine of Virtue*. 

442
for example, should turn out to be hypothetical: (a) the Hypothetical Imperative, (b) "If one aims to be a concert violinist, one ought to practice," and (c) "Jack Glatzer ought to practice his violin." What these have in common is simply that they are parts of a certain pattern of argument for particular prescriptions, such as (c). (See pp. 431-432.) If we think of particular prescriptions as imperatives prescribing unequivocally what a particular person ought to do at a certain time, then we can characterize hypothetical imperatives in general as follows. Imperatives are hypothetical if either they support particular prescriptions for a person only in conjunction with premises describing that person's ends or they cannot themselves be supported without premises describing the ends of the person to whom they are directed. No information about an agent's ends is required to support (a) and (b) above, but these will not tell a particular person specifically what he ought to do until such information is supplied. The Hypothetical Imperative, then, is like more specific imperatives of the typical "If one wills . . . , one ought . . ." type in this respect: they are hypothetical because no specific unequivocal directives can be derived from them until we know what ends the agent in question wills. Particular prescriptions such as (c) above are hypothetical for a different reason: although they express unequivocal prescriptions to an agent, those prescriptions cannot be rationally defended without information about the agent's ends.

In either case, there is no route from first principles of reason to particular prescriptions for an individual until the individual has committed himself to certain goals, and the character of the resulting prescriptions is contingent upon the nature of those goals.

Categorical imperatives, by contrast, can be defined as imperatives which are not hypothetical. 19 If there are categorical

---

19 An apparent counterexample is the following case. Suppose I promise a friend that if I choose (will) to run for political office I shall tell him immediately. Then I decide to run. The imperative "I ought to tell my friend now" cannot be supported without the information that I willed a certain end, and so it must be classified as hypothetical even though it seems obviously a moral imperative. Though bizarre, this consequence need not be too trou-
imperatives, we can expect at least one to be a general principle of rationality and others to be specific "ought" judgments derived from this: for example, on Kant's view, the Categorical Imperative and the more specific prohibition against lying. To any categorical imperative we should be able to add "regardless of what you will," or something similar. The most general categorical imperative, like the Hypothetical Imperative, should be rational independent of contingent facts about which means are necessary for various ends; but particular categorical imperatives must be independent only of facts about what the agent's ends are. Both the Hypothetical Imperative and the Categorical Imperative might support a particular imperative, such as "I ought to tell the truth now," but then the imperative will be categorical because information about the agent's own ends is not necessary to establish the rationality of the prescription. The issue whether moral principles really are categorical imperatives is simply the issue whether there is a general principle of rationality, distinct from the Hypothetical Imperative, which can support those moral principles and their specific applications without relying at any stage upon a certain type of empirical information—namely, what the agent in question wills to pursue as an end. It is this independence of the commitments of the agent, and not independence of all empirical facts whatever, that makes moral prescriptions categorical (if they are).

III

So far the Hypothetical Imperative has been presented as the expression of a principle which any fully rational person would adopt and which men ought always to follow. Moreover, I have suggested that it is misleading to say that the Categorical Imperative takes precedence over the Hypothetical Imperative, for, properly understood, the two principles cannot conflict. The

blesome. For the imperative "I ought to tell my friend now" is based on moral principles, and one could still regard these as categorical imperatives. The relevant categorical imperatives would be "One ought to keep promises (unless . . .)" and "I ought to tell my friend now or change my plan to run for office."
THE HYPOTHETICAL IMPERATIVE

main difference between the principles which has appeared so far is that the Hypothetical Imperative can be applied only when information about the agent's ends is supplied. This difference, however, hardly seems sufficient to account for the sublimity which Kant accords to the Categorical Imperative. There must be some further distinction which explains the extraordinary importance Kant placed on the Categorical Imperative and his comparative neglect of the Hypothetical Imperative.

One difference, of course, is that Kant held the Hypothetical Imperative to be easier to follow and to justify than the Categorical Imperative. The Categorical Imperative often demands the sacrifice of self-interest whereas the Hypothetical Imperative, typically, is in the service of long-term self-interest. The Hypothetical Imperative rarely calls for the sort of internal struggle that the Categorical Imperative demands. Moreover, on Kant's view, the Hypothetical Imperative can be inferred rather simply from a proposition analytic of the ordinary concept of rationality whereas the Categorical Imperative can be justified, if at all, only by a long, tortured argument employing both "analytic" and "synthetic" methods. These differences no doubt help to account for the fact that Kant devoted so much more space to the Categorical Imperative, but they do not explain the boundless esteem Kant felt for the man who acts out of respect for the Categorical Imperative. Why should he not have equal esteem for the man who, following the Hypothetical Imperative, overcomes immediate impulse for the sake of some long-range goal?

The Categorical Imperative, unlike the Hypothetical Imperative, is supposed to be a synthetic principle. Although this does not, by itself, explain the special importance of the Categorical Imperative, it does provide a clue. For, when we consider why the Categorical Imperative is synthetic, we discover that the reason has to do with a distinctive connection between the Categorical Imperative and positive freedom (autonomy); and this connection, I suggest, is what makes the Categorical Imperative uniquely important to Kant.

Why is the Categorical Imperative synthetic? To say that the Categorical Imperative is synthetic, strictly speaking, is to say
THOMAS E. HILL, JR.

that it is not an analytic proposition that any fully rational person would follow the principle expressed in the Categorical Imperative. This proposition is synthetic because the idea of the subject—that is, a fully rational person—does not "contain" the idea of the predicate—that is, following the principle expressed in the Categorical Imperative. In other words, the proposition that a person is completely rational does not, by itself, entail that the person will follow the principle. Nevertheless, the idea of a fully rational person is supposed to be necessarily connected with the idea of following the principles expressed in the Categorical Imperative. That is, that any fully rational person would follow the principle is a necessary, synthetic truth. The argument seems to be this.\(^{20}\)

(i) Any fully rational and positively free person would follow the principle expressed by the Categorical Imperative.

(ii) Any person ("will") that is negatively free is also positively free.

(iii) Any rational person is negatively free.

Therefore,

(iv) Any fully rational person would follow the principle expressed by the Categorical Imperative.

The first and second premises are supposed to be established by conceptual analysis in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Chapter II and the first three paragraphs of Chapter III. The third premise, (iii), cannot be obtained by conceptual analysis even though Kant argues (in Chapter III) on a priori grounds that it is, for practical purposes, a reasonable assumption. One cannot infer that a person is negatively free simply from the premise that he is rational. One needs intermediate steps, employing a "third term," the idea of an intelligible world. The argument for (iii), it seems, runs as follows.

(\(P_1\)) Any rational person is a member of an intelligible world.

(\(P_2\)) Any member of an intelligible world is negatively free.

\(^{20}\) Here I reconstruct what I take to be the main lines of Kant's argument in the *Groundwork*, primarily in ch. III.
Therefore,

(3) Any rational person is negatively free.

At least one of the intermediate steps, \((P_1)\) and \((P_2)\), is not obtained by conceptual analysis, and therefore (3) is synthetic. Because (4) cannot be established without (3), (4) is also synthetic.

The noteworthy feature of this argument for the Categorical Imperative is the essential role played by the idea of positive freedom (or autonomy). This idea need not enter into the justification of the Hypothetical Imperative, for the Hypothetical Imperative is simply the expression in imperative form of the allegedly analytic proposition that if any fully rational person wills an end then he wills the necessary means within his power. The Categorical Imperative, then, is connected with autonomy in a way that the Hypothetical Imperative is not. The nature of the connection can be summarized as follows. Any rational person with desires is bound by the Categorical Imperative if and only if he has an autonomous will. In fact, the Categorical Imperative is, on Kant's view, simply one way of expressing the constraints that all rational and autonomous persons would impose on themselves. One must make one's conduct conform to the Categorical Imperative, then, in order to avoid acting contrary to principles that one freely adopted. And when respect for the Categorical Imperative is the motive for one's conduct, one's actions express one's nature as an autonomous person. Thus, in a sense, the man who acts from respect for the Categorical Imperative is the most completely free.

These remarks require explanation. They may lead one to infer that a person is free only when he acts morally, but this inference would be mistaken. Kant distinguishes two different kinds of freedom. The first is what he calls "negative freedom." This is "the property (of a will) of being able to work independently of determination by alien causes."\(^{21}\) All men, good and bad, have this freedom, which consists of being able to choose to do things without one's choices being entirely the result of prior causes. In saying that men have autonomous (or positively free) wills, Kant attributes to them a second kind of freedom.

\(^{21}\) *Groundwork*, p. 114 (446).
This is "the property of being a law to oneself." A person is a law to himself, I take it, if he adopts principles for himself and regards himself bound by them and if he was not caused or even motivated to adopt them by any contingent circumstances (such as his desires). A person who is autonomous in this sense gives himself principles without accepting them on authority, out of fear, or even from an interest in his own or others' welfare. He regards himself bound by these principles and is disposed to follow them, but does not always do so. All men, Kant held, are autonomous in this sense. And, in fact, the only principles they adopt as autonomous persons are those expressed in the various formulations of the Categorical Imperative.

Now consider three possible life patterns of men who are both negatively and positively free. In the first case we have a man who, with his negatively free will, elects on some occasions to act contrary to the Categorical Imperative. He is thereby acting contrary to principles which he himself adopted independently of his particular fears, wants, authorities, and so forth. Though he remains free in Kant's two senses, there is a further sense in which he is not completely free. He, like the incontinent man, is not perfectly "self-governing"; for he fails to follow principles that he freely adopted. Admittedly, he may be following other principles—for example, maxims of self-interest—which he also willed; but he can hardly be completely self-governing if he has adopted principles which conflict with one another. Because he freely adopted his principles, he is autonomous in a way that he would not be if he had blindly taken all his principles on authority. Nevertheless, in so far as he does not completely live by his principles, he fails to express or manifest his autonomy in the most complete way.

Now contrast this man with one who always conforms to the Categorical Imperative. Whatever his personal maxims, they never direct him to act contrary to the principle he has adopted.

---


23 One is naturally inclined to object that one never actually took the step of adopting moral principles; but Kant's argument that men "give themselves" the moral law is not based on observation of the "phenomenal" experience of deciding to accept them.
as an autonomous person. Such a man at least lacks the incontinence of one who fails to live by his own principles; and he is not divided against himself in the manner of the man who adopts personal maxims that conflict with the Categorical Imperative. Nevertheless, if his conformity to the Categorical Imperative was a result of fortunate desires rather than respect for the Categorical Imperative, then he is still not expressing his nature as an autonomous person. He gives himself principles as an autonomous person, but they are inoperative in his life. His life is just what it would be if he had lacked an autonomous will.

The person who most completely lives as an autonomous person, then, is the one for whom the disposition to follow the Categorical Imperative is most effective. That is, he not only conforms to the principles that he freely adopted but does so because they are principles that he freely and rationally adopted. This is the person most completely "self-governing."

Why, then, did Kant hold conscientious adherence to the Categorical Imperative in such high regard? It was, I suggest, to a large extent because he felt that the noblest feature of humanity is the capacity to be self-governing, to adopt principles without being influenced by sensuous motives and then to live by them whatever the contingencies. On Kant's theory, the man who best realizes this capacity is the man who acts from respect for the Categorical Imperative.

I conclude with two brief comments. First, if my explanation of the importance of moral conduct is correct, then Kant should not be viewed as a man obsessed with duty for duty's sake. He believed, of course, that one ought always to do one's duty and also that only acts motivated by respect for moral law have moral worth. What is uniquely important to Kant about moral conduct, however, is not its difficulty, orderliness, or purposelessness; it is rather the fact that moral conduct is the practical exercise of the noble capacity to be rational and self-governing, a capacity which sets us apart from the lower animals and gives us dignity. Kant's ethics is as much an ethics of self-esteem as it is an ethics of duty.24

---

24 This idea I take from Rawls's lectures.
Finally, without overlooking the important differences between the Categorical Imperative and the Hypothetical Imperative, we may note a further similarity. Both principles, as it turns out, enjoin a person to follow through on what he himself wills. The Hypothetical Imperative tells him not to balk at the necessary means to the ends he wills, and the commands of the Categorical Imperative are simply the constraints he himself adopts as a rational and autonomous person. To put the point paradoxically, we could summarize the demands of practical reason by saying, “Do what you will.”

THOMAS E. HILL, Jr.

University of California, Los Angeles