

Kant's Hypothetical Imperative

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Dissertation Abstract:

This dissertation offers a new perspective on a long-standing problem in Kant's practical philosophy: how we should understand the nature and normativity of hypothetical imperatives. Kant famously claims that there are two kinds of imperatives, hypothetical and categorical, and that they are essentially distinct. The former command with conditional necessity and are, broadly speaking, instrumental, whereas the latter command with unconditional necessity and are moral. On the traditional interpretation, hypothetical imperatives are thought to be genuinely practical imperatives that command us to will the means to our ends, and they are thought to guard primarily against cases of akrasia. On my view, hypothetical imperatives express theoretical inferences that have practical application, and they instruct against theoretical mistakes, such as miscalculation.

On the traditional interpretation, the essential distinction between the categorical and hypothetical imperatives collapses. For Kantians who accept this interpretation, the debate about what hypothetical imperatives require is about the scope of the necessity. Both sides of the debate treat the 'ought' that expresses this practical imperative as expressing *practical* necessity, but disagree on how to interpret its scope. On the more natural narrow-scope reading, the 'ought' has scope only over the consequent of the conditional statement in which it figures; it says that if you will an end, then you ought to will the necessary means. The worry is that if the 'ought' is regarded as an operator whose scope ranges over the consequent of the conditional, then the mere fact that we will an end allows us to detach a command to will the necessary means to it. Notice, we *could* detach an imperative that conflicts with other rational requirements – most problematically, the moral ones.

In order to avoid this problem, many Kantians have adopted some version of what Stephen Engstrom has called the "material interpretation," according to which hypothetical imperatives are narrow-scope commands, but they apply only to ends endorsed by practical reason: if we ought to will ends, then we ought to will the necessary means to them. On this interpretation, the necessity to will the means derives from the *categorical* requirement to will the end. Others, however, have opted for the wide-scope view, according to which the 'ought' has scope over the entire conditional, and tells us that it 'ought' to be the case that if we will an end, then we take the means to it. In this case the hypothetical imperative is actually an unconditional imperative with disjunctive content: either will the means to the end that you will, or give up the end. It requires an agent to will consistently, but does not allow us to detach commands to will the means based on the mere fact that we will an end. Straightforwardly, this is no longer a conditional imperative, it is a categorical imperative to will consistently. Further, if we are to derive particular prescriptions to will the means, we will need detaching conditions enabling us to detach the consequent of the embedded conditional. Since mere facts about

what our ends are will not do this, I argue that the only plausible detaching condition is an end that we ought to will. The necessity to will the particular means derives from a categorical requirement to will the end, and this is just the material interpretation.

I argue that if we understand hypothetical imperatives as commands to *will* the necessary means to our ends all imperatives will be categorical—their practical necessity will derive from a categorical, and therefore moral imperative. We therefore lose the crucial distinction between instrumental and moral reason, all practical failing shows up as evil.

If we conceive of willing ends and willing means as two distinct and separate volitions, thereby understanding hypothetical imperatives as primarily *anti-akratic* rational requirements that command the *additional* volition of the necessary means to our ends (even if we may be tempted not to take them), then we will require a categorical imperative to somehow bring these volitions together. However, I argue that, for Kant, willing an end and willing the means are the very *same* volition, and the imperative represents the volition of the necessary action as already included in the volition of the end. Therefore, a command to will the necessary means, just is the command to will the end, and so looking for an explanation of this command, on a Kantian account, will require a categorical imperative. I argue instead that the content of hypothetical imperatives is merely theoretical, and expresses what a rational being must do *in order to* make herself the cause of an effect in nature: her “end.” This interpretation avoids the significant textual and theoretical problems that the alternative views run into. Most significantly, we avoid a troublesome distortion of Kant’s practical philosophy: thinking that all practical normativity expresses moral constraints. My interpretation preserves Kant’s crucial distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives, and the corresponding practical distinction between evil and stupidity.