

# Universalized Maxims as Moral Laws

## The Categorical Imperative Revisited

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### I

The nature and meaning of the formulas given by Kant to the Categorical Imperative in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*<sup>1</sup> has been a perplexing problem for generations of students of Kantian moral philosophy. For a long time since the publication of the *Groundwork* hardly a satisfactory explanation has been forwarded to both the question of the meaning of these formulas and their role in Kant's ethics. A major point in an outstanding theory of morality has thus remained obscure, loaded with difficulties — to the discredit of Kant's thought.

Led by Kant's language, particularly by that of the first formula of the Categorical Imperative in the *Groundwork*<sup>2</sup>, and by the assumption — heavily stressed by Kant — that the moral law does not rest on any empirical element but is aprioristic and formal in nature, the traditional interpretation of the Categorical Imperative regarded it as a practical test for distinguishing moral from immoral action. The test was supposed to be based upon a principle of logical consistency, i.e., the morality of an action can be determined by whether the maxim upon which the action is based can be generalized into a universal law without resulting in a contradiction. A contradiction within the law makes it

<sup>1</sup> Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. Tr. H. J. Paton (Hutchinson, 1966) — hereinafter referred to as *Groundwork*. References are to Paton's translation and to the *Akademie's* edition.

<sup>2</sup> We shall use Paton's list and enumeration of the formulas, since it is convenient and the best known: *Formula 1* or the Formula of Universal Law: Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law; *Formula 1 a* or the Formula of the Law of Nature: Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature; *Formula 2* or the Formula of the End in Itself: So act as to use humanity, both in your own person and in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end, never simply as a means; *Formula 3* or the Formula of Autonomy: So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxims; *Formula 3a* or the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends: So act as if you were always through your maxim a law making member in a universal kingdom of ends. — H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative* (London, Hutchinson 1967, 6th ed.) — hereinafter referred to as *Categorical Imperative* — 129.