

Formulating Categorical Imperatives¹

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According to Kant, the supreme principle of morality is the categorical imperative². Given the obvious importance of this principle, it is crucial that it is understood correctly. Such an understanding would begin initially with a formulation. Kant arrives at an initial formulation of the categorical imperative at the end of *Groundwork I*³. This formulation is arrived at via an *analysis* of popular reason and runs: "I ought never to act except in such a way *that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law*"⁴.

However, in Chapter Two of the *Groundwork* Kant complicates the issue by giving a number of different formulations. As Paton notes: "We might have expected Kant to be content with one formulation of the categorical imperative. Instead he embarrasses us with no less than five different formulae⁵, though, curiously enough, he tends to speak as if there were only three"⁶.

The question of the correct formulation of the categorical imperative is further complicated by the fact that Kant at one point claims that there is only "a single categorical imperative"⁷, i. e., the formula of universal law. Yet later he describes universality as merely the "*form*" of the categorical imperative, with the Formula of an End in Itself and the Kingdom of Ends as describing the "*matter*" and "*complete determination*" respectively⁸. And if this were not confusing enough, he also describes the relation of the three formulations just mentioned in two further ways: as each representing a complete determination of the categorical imperative⁹, and as bringing "an idea of reason nearer to intuition (in accordance with a certain analogy) and so nearer to feeling"¹⁰.

¹ Throughout this paper I will first give the page number of the English translation, followed by the page number of the *Akademie* edition.

² *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Tr. H. J. Paton. Harper Torchbooks: New York, 1964, p. 71/403 & 104/437.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 70/402.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70/402. Cf. p. 88/421 for the more famous wording of this formulation.

⁵ Whether there are in fact five formulae as Paton claims will be strongly challenged in this essay.

⁶ H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative: A Study in Kant's Moral Philosophy*. Hutchinson and Co.: London, 1958, p. 129.

⁷ *Groundwork*, p. 88/421.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 103 – 104/436.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 103/436.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 103/436.