Kant’s Fundamental Principles Of The Metaphysics Of Moral Essay, Research Paper

Kant’s Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Moral

The central concept of Kant’s Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of

Morals is the categorical imperative. ?The conception of an objective principle,

in so far as it is obligatory for a will, is called a command (of reason), and

the formula of the command is called an Imperative.? (Abbott, 30) An imperative

is something that a will ought or shall do because the will is obligated to act

in the manner in which it conforms with moral law. The categorical imperative

is an obligation by the will to act so that the action can be classified as a

universal law. When one acts in conformity with the universal law at all times,

they are following out the categorical imperative. This differs from the

hypothetical imperative in that the hypothetical imperative acts on the basis

that the will in the end will gain something (not a means to an end). The

categorical imperative is a means to an end, and the action to obtain the end

must have moral worth. Stipulations of the categorical imperative are that all

actions should act only on the maxim, that actions have moral worth, and the end

is necessary. From these stipulations, it can be derived that the categorical

imperative should be followed in order to live morally. ?If an action is

conceived as good in itself and consequently as being necessarily the principle

of a will which of itself conforms to reason, then it is categorical.? (Abbott,

32) ?There is therefore but one categorical imperative, namely, this: Act only

on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a

universal law.? (Abbott, 38) The categorical imperative must be found A Priori

and it excludes all interests and desires.

Kant uses four examples to better describe the working of the categorical

imperative in Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals. The first

example is of a man who is suffering from many misfortunes in life and wishes to

commit sucicide on the basis of self-love. Kant declares that this cannot be

the categorical imperative at work because the maxim derived from self-love, to

shorten his life to avoid more pain, is a contradiction in itself for no man can

kill himself painlessly and therefore cannot be a universal maxim. The action

of killing oneself would cause pain, which is not in conformity to the maxim

stated to avoid pain. The second example Kant gives is based on the basic

premise of lying. A man is forced to borrow money which he knows he will never

be able to repay but he promises to do so anyway. This action is not consistent

with duty and the maxim could be expressed as: ?When I [the man] think myself in

want of money, I will borrow money and promise to repay it, although I know that

I never can do so.?(Abbott, 39) The maxim cannot hold as a universal law

because if everyone lied about promises, the promise itself would become

impossible, and the end would be unattainable. Telling the truth is an end in

itself. The third example is of a man who it bestowed a natural ability but

does not use it to it’s full extent. Kant sees this as not a categorical

imperative because a rational being necessarily wills that he develop his skills

for many possible reasons. Rational beings are an end in themselves, and if you

do not better yourself, you are not serving yourself.(Abbott, 40) Lastly, the

fourth man, in great prosperity, has a chance to help others in need and does

not. This can be viewed as a workable universal law, but it cannot be willed as

the good thing to do because if no one gave to society, society would not get

the aid when desired. The main basis of a categorical imperative is that ?we

must be able to will that a maxim of our action should be a universal law.?

(Abbott, 41) A universal law where people betray the rights of men or otherwise

violates them, cannot be true.

The formula of the categorical imperative is to act so that the maxim can

be applied as a universal law. One must act on the maxim of the action as if it

were a universal law of nature. The principle that determines the action is not

based on the goal of the action but on the ability of the maxim to be universal.

From this paper, it was learned what Kant’s categorical imperative is, how

it is derived, and some examples of the categorical imperative at work.

According to Kant, all actions of the categorical imperative should be able to

conform to a universal law and should be willed as well as obeyed by all.

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