

Theodor I. Oizerman

KANT'S CATEGORICAL
IMPERATIVE AS A SUBJECT
OF CRITICAL ANALYSIS

This article is an attempt at a comprehensive analysis of the core of Kant's ethics – the categorical imperative. The author considers and analyses critical comments of different philosophers and specialists in Kant's philosophy regarding the categorical imperative.

Key words: metaphysics, ethics, Kant, categorical imperative.

Metaphysics, whose concept developed in connection with the classification of Aristotle's works carried out by Andronicus of Rhodes, was understood as the *first*, i.e. main, philosophy. Natural philosophy, theory of knowledge, philosophy of history, ethics and aesthetics were not considered its elements, i.e. were regarded as secondary philosophical disciplines. Kant was the first philosopher to include the "secondary" doctrines into metaphysics. Thus, metaphysics became, according to Kant, the whole content of philosophy. However, he put stress on *ethics* as the principal metaphysical discipline. Morality (practical reason in Kant's terminology) has *primacy* over theoretical reason, theory of knowledge and natural philosophy.

What did encourage Kant to carry out such radical turn in formulating the subject matter of philosophy? It cannot be explained only by personal features of the philosopher. A more important circumstance is that he was active in the age of the early accumulation of capital, which was critically described by famous Thomas More in his *Utopia* with sharp criticism. Emerging capitalism destroyed mercilessly not only patriarchal community relations but also the associated system of moral rules. E. Solovyov stresses that, as a result, the mercantilising feudal elite cultivated in the society an *amoral interpretation of morality* [12, p. 127]. It is that interpretation and the increasing *relativisation* of moral rules that Kant stood up against. Opposing ethical subjectivism, Kant absolutises and universalises moral rules defining their sum as the *categorical impera-*

tive — an unconditional command of pure, i.e. independent of sensual incitement, reason. Such theoretical position is fraught with one-sidedness; it *ignores* historical development of morality, its dependence on the living conditions. However, this one-sidedness is not only a weakness but also the foundation of historic importance of Kant's moral doctrine, which accentuates the *eternal* in diverse development of moral consciousness. A talented researcher in the field of morality, O.G. Drobnitsky, was absolutely right to mention that Kant would not have been a classic of philosophy and ethics if he had not succeeded in expressing the contradictions, problems and spiritual experience of his age. His theory was an important landmark in the history of ethical thought, which is still of importance today [4, p. 142].

The principles of morality, according to Kant are a priori and immanent to human consciousness, although not inborn. It leads us to a conclusion that morality is self-sufficient and, therefore, independent of religion. Ethics, from Kant's point of view, is a sphere of internal human legislation. Ethics implies that a naturally free person (which, of course, means pure practical reason) formulates their own moral law. However, Kant's understanding of relation between morality and religion is, in effect, more complicated and controversial than the thesis that morality is independent of religion. A truly moral person inevitably comes to faith. This provision is, of course, incompatible with the thesis about morality's independence of religion. Nevertheless, there are quite a few incompatibilities of the kind in Kant's philosophy (as well as in any other great philosophical doctrine). I am far from calling it a flaw: on the contrary, the immediate incongruity is, at the same time, the *problemaisation* of the question constantly faced by a person, society, and humanity.

What creates the need to believe in God? Surprisingly, Kant, meaning its a priori nature, refers to everyday experience, which indicates that good works are often not rewarded and, on the contrary, prove to be harmful to the person, while one benefits from evil and crime, which lead to success and are not always punished. But equity, Kant accentuates, is something absolute. Defied equity will inevitably prevail. Since it is not always the case in the real world, consequently, one should assume the existence of the other world and divine retribution. This belief in the unconditional triumph of equity is characterised by Kant as the "moral proof" of God's existence, which, as he constantly stresses, should not be confused with a *theoretical, logical* proof, the latter being impossible.

The crucial element of the categorical imperative is the concept of duty. Thus Kant says "For I must first be certain that I do not act contrary to my duty; only then am I allowed to look toward such happiness" [16, p. 67]. The word *duty* is characterised by Kant as great and sublime, something that does not flatter people but demands obedience. All sensual incitements — that oppose it secretly — fall silent before the idea of duty. Thus, the concept of duty — the a priori concept of practical reason — is opposed to the ethics of eudemonism.

The categorical imperative *specifies* the concept of duty, i.e. indicates how one *should* act in order to follow the commands of conscience. It is of interest that Kant does not limit it to one formula, which would inevitably lead to its one-sided understanding. The first formula is as follows: "The categorical imperative, which as such only affirms what obligation is, is: act upon a maxim that can also hold as a universal law" [15, p. 17]. The second formula of the imperative, which is of no less importance, says: "*Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only*" [13, p. 87]. It is worth noting that it is the very formula of the categorical imperative that Kant italicised attaching to it an important meaning. A person, as a sentient being, is an end in itself; consequently, no one should treat them as a means to achieve

a certain end. If the first formula is, to a great extent, formalistic, the second one characterises the *content* and moral orientation of actions. It results in the rejection of class privileges (and classes in general), the rejection of dominance of one person over another, the rejection of power if it is not recognised (directly or indirectly) by the free will of a free person.

The third formula of the categorical imperative proclaims the free will of a person to be the architect of universal laws: "Thus the *principle* of every human will as a *will giving universal law through all its maxims*, provided it is otherwise correct, would be very well suited to be the categorical imperative by this: that just because of the idea of giving universal law it is based on no interest and therefore, among all possible imperatives, can alone be *unconditional* [17, p. 82]¹.

The last formula of the categorical imperative determines the moral behaviour of a person as a *citizen* a full-fledged member of a *constitutional* state, who freely abides by the established laws, since they took part in their formulation or at least approves of them. This approval as an act of transcendental will (for only it is free) is, consequently, not only a psychologically (empirically) explicable action, but a *social* action. It deciphers the concept of transcendentalism in terms of its relation to a citizen who perceives themselves as such. The point is that a human individual is social, socialised creature that is inseparable from society, in the framework of which their individual social consciousness has developed. As A. Drobnitsky mentions, the "superindividuality" of the subject is the actual sense of the notion of *transcendental subject*, the sense, which was apparently rejected by Kant. He emphasises that the secret of a free will lies not within the mechanisms of human psychic but in the method, by which personality relates to social reality. Drobnitsky calls this conclusion a possible solution to Kant's "transcendental being" [4, p. 146].

The categorical imperative becomes more clear and admissible when it is interpreted as a moral prohibition against certain actions, which was accentuated by A.A. Guseinov. Thus, Kant illustrates his reasoning with the example of a moral rule: "thou shalt not lie". From times immemorial, this formula has been considered the primary condition of morality. Falsehood is not compatible with a free will, which represents moral consciousness. Of course, a liar cannot be called a moral person. With his intrinsic ideological courage, especially striking in the context of spiritual atmosphere of the then Prussia, Kant gives examples, in which, despite the everyday routine, a by no means amoral human consciousness has to choose between the truth and a lie. Let us assume, Kant reasons, that your house became a shelter for an innocent man pursued by a murderer. The would-be murderer asks you whether that person hid in your house. You are aware that you are facing a murderer. Do you have the moral right to say that that person is not in your house? Kant answers this question *negatively*, since one should *always* say *only* the truth. This example points out a flaw in Kant's rigoristic understanding of the requirements of moral law. Accepting the

¹ Expounding his third formula, Kant writes: "It was seen that the human being is bound to laws by his duty, but it never occurred to them that he is subject *only to laws given by himself but still universal* and that he is bound only to act in conformity with his own will, which, however, in accordance with nature's end' is a will giving universal law" [ibid]. Kant's comment regarding this formula of the categorical imperative — "among all possible imperatives, can alone be *unconditional*" should not be understood as a statement of the conditional nature of the other formulae of the categorical imperative. It refers to "all possible imperative", in particular, the hypothetical and assertoric ones. One can also conclude that this phrase is an unhappy expression of Kant's actual thought. There are numerous examples of the kind in his works.

universal significance of the categorical imperative, a real person in real conditions *is obliged* to take into account all evident circumstances. If, for example, during a war, a soldier is taken captive, should they tell the enemy about the location of their unit, of how many people it consists of and what other units are located on the same territory? It is evident that the soldier is *morally* obliged to *lie*, to misinform the enemy. Otherwise, he is a traitor, an obviously amoral creature.

Kant's categorical imperative demands: "thou shalt not kill"! It can hardly be objected in the everyday life. A murder is not only amoral but is a crime liable to severe punishment. However, our world is still not free of wars. There is no need to say that the moral commandment "thou shalt not kill" proves completely senseless in the battlefield. One should not kill prisoners of war, it is amoral. It is amoral to raid occupied territories. It is amoral to inflict violence against civilians. But the enemy, if they do not capitulate, should be destroyed.

It is worth noting that, in everyday life, the principle "thou shalt not kill" requires that all circumstances are reasonably taken into account. Should a doctor, when asked by a dying patient, who, as it often happens, still hopes for the better, tell the whole truth? I think that, in this case, the doctor should not tell the patient the truth. For example, in regular, even happy, married life, it is hardly reasonable to answer every question truthfully. In my opinion, if people always told each other the truth, the life would become unbearable. However, "thou shalt not lie" retains its significance in all cases when its violation is not called for by adverse circumstances. Indeed, as I will show below, Kant admits the need for such reservation regardless of the categorical imperative.

All this arguments against the absolutisation of categorical imperative have been put forward by a number of specialists in Kant studies. For instance, A. Riel writes that categorical imperative is only a formula, which should provide, in certain situations, that we are aware of our duty; however it is not a principle of our behaviour [10, p. 26]. Of course, one cannot agree with the statement that the categorical imperative indicates our duty only in certain cases. On the contrary, it indicates our constant duty. The statement that the categorical imperative is not a principle of our behaviour is true in the sense suggested by Kant: nobody has ever acted in *all* cases according to this moral law. However, Kant did not think that the requirements of the categorical imperative are impossible to meet. If it were the case, this moral law would lose the status of a law and turn into a utopian recommendation. From Kant's point of view, if the due were impossible to fulfil, it would cease to be the due.

One can agree with A.P. Skripnik, who wrote that a person cannot worship morality as an idol, but when it comes to this, the idolater can sacrifice the interests of the others for the sake of their own interests [11, p. 147]².

² However, it is difficult to agree with Skripnik when he states that the categorical imperative, being an expression of the formal aspect of moral thinking about the world is as incapable to guide a person in the choice of morally right actions as formal logic can help in the pursuit of the truth [ibid]. Formal logic helps avoid logical errors and, in its contemporary form, as a symbolic (mathematical logic), play even a more significant role in the process of cognition. As E. Yu. Solovyov mentions in a number of his publications, the categorical imperative gives a universal character to moral requirements that have been formulated throughout the history of civilization. Kant, Solovyov writes, expressed in a strict form something that people had always understood. He adds that there is no human society that would deny the absolute difference between good and evil, would not condemn lies, perfidy, and ungratefulness, would not understand that a good deed performed selflessly (for its own sake) is more valuable than a good deed performed in fear, for a reward or due to other external motives [12, p. 122].

The categorical imperative is, according to Kant's teaching, an authentic manifestation of an a priori, independent of sensual incitements, free will, which is understood, in particular as freedom of choice. An empirical will, the motives of which are of inevitably sensible character, cannot be free, it is held captive by sensible inclinations. Only transcendental will, i.e. the "thing-in-itself (or noumenon) is free. Kant defines this freedom as an ability to choose what the reason deems good. A free will is a good will. It leads to an unambiguous conclusion: "a free will and a will under moral law are one and the same" [14, p.53]. In other words, practical (moral) freedom is independence of will from any law except the moral one, i.e. the categorical imperative. Here arises a question that is, for some reason, not discussed by Kant. Moral actions, including felonies, are not performed by an empirical will, which is not free, according to Kant's doctrine. These deeds contradict morality, since they are done by an individual and are manifestations of a transcendental (free) will. Some hints at this circumstance can be traced in Kant's interpretation of the *subjectivity* of radical evil intrinsic to human nature. However, Kant never says that a free will is not always subordinate to the moral law. Nevertheless, he cannot admit that "moral evil... must originate from freedom;... a propensity to evil can only attach to the moral faculty of choice" [18, p. 54].

The accentuated duality of Kant's understanding of the freedom of will — as both moral and amoral, good and evil — was mentioned as early as 1888 by an English philosopher, H. Sidgwick, in an article published in the *Mind* magazine (later, this article was included in his book *Methodes of Ethics* — its most recent issue appeared in 1962). Many specialists on Kant's philosophy, in particular, L. Beck, the author of *A commentary on the Critique of pure reason*, J. Silber, and N. Potter, set out to disprove Sidgwick's point of view. All of them opposed the freedom of will to choice, which was characterised as something akin to negative freedom restrained by sensible inclinations. However, Kant does not oppose freedom to choice, which he regards as a necessary form of the manifestation of a free will. At the same time, he distinguishes a choice under the influence of sensible inclinations, but even this circumstance does not make choice not free. Such choice is, according to Kant, non-pure freedom. Kant distinguishes it from pure choice. "That choice which can be determined by *pure reason* is called free choice... *Freedom* of choice is this independence from being *determined* by sensible impulses; this is the negative concept of freedom. The positive concept of freedom is that of the ability of pure reason to be of itself practical" [15, p.13].

Thus, we cannot but admit that here we face the intrinsic to any great philosophical system *ambivalence*, incongruity, inconsistency of the basic provisions. And this, as mentioned above, should not be considered as only a flaw, the lack of logical consistency, etc. This ambivalence is rich in content. In effect, it does not boil down to the ambivalence of Kant's doctrine. Here we should speak of the ambivalence of cognition and morality.

The critics of Kant's ethical doctrine usually reproach him for *rigorism* defining the latter as an excessively strict and categorical interpretation of moral rules. Of course there are solid bases for the accusation, as we can see from the above reasoning. Even Kant's article *On a supposed right to lie from altruistic motives* (1797) certainly supports this accusation. But Kant, being quite consistent in this case, agrees entirely with that he takes the position of ethical rigorism. Moreover, he stresses that the rejection of rigorism in ethics questions the unconditional obligatory nature of moral rules. However, Kant mentions, experience prefers the interim position between the two extremes,

It is of great consequence to ethics in general, however, to preclude, so far as possible, anything morally intermediate, either in actions (*adiaphora*) or in human characters; for with any such ambiguity all maxims run the risk of losing their determination and stability [18, 47–48]. In my opinion, one should accept this argument. Ethical principles should be formulated without any reservations, however, when applying them, *volens-nolens*, one should take into account the circumstances – which Kant did not want to admit and thus was wrong. At the same time, the above statement points to the need to take into account the circumstances. It was Kant who called "*to preclude, so far as possible*" any deviations from the proper fulfilment of moral requirements. It means he almost allows that this or that moral requirement can be impossible to fulfil. In my opinion, there is no other way to interpret this reservation.

Thus, the ethical principle formulated as an abstract judgement should be *specified* for everyday application. A proverb says, there are no rules without exception. It also relates to the field of morality, if the exception is justified. It can be justified by moral arguments.

Kant's categorical imperative is usually criticised as ethical formalism. We should consider this circumstance. In my opinion, any principle – not only in ethics, but in every field of knowledge, provided it is formulated as apodictically universal – entails inevitably certain formalism. It is also applicable to the formulation of natural laws, since such formulation requires something "ideal", for example, absolute vacuum, perfect gas, perfect fluid, etc. However, Kant's categorical imperative is characterised not only by *necessary* formalism, but also its limitation and, in certain cases, even its rejection. I mean the second and third formulations of this moral law. A person should not be treated as a *means*; they should be an end both for themselves and others. A person should abide by only those judicial requirements that are adopted with his immediate or mediate concern. Of course, these formulae are abstract and, thus, to a degree, not free from formalism, but they have certain *content*, which implies the rejection of formalism.

Of course, the problem of the content of the categorical imperative does not apply to actions aimed not at fulfilling the duty, but rather achieving something else. Such actions are characterised by Kant as corresponding not to the categorical, but the conditional (hypothetical or assertoric) imperative. For example, a merchant never cheats his clients, assuming (not without a reason) that such behaviour will help him make most profit. In this case, the obedience to moral rules is of *legal* character, and does not have an immediate connection to morality. The categorical imperative, unlike the conditional one, has only one foundation: the recognition of duty. It means that moral behaviour is defined not only by actions but also by the underlying motives, or, in Kant's words, the maxim. In this sense, the categorical imperative is formulated by Kant regardless of the possible, certain content of an action. "There is one imperative that, without being based upon and having as its condition any other purpose to be attained by certain conduct, *commands* this conduct immediately. This imperative is categorical. It has to do not with the matter of the action and what is to result from it, but with the form and the principle from which the action itself follows; and the essentially good in the action' consists in the disposition, let the result be what it may. This imperative may be called the imperative of morality" [17, p. 69].

Marxists were especially critical of the "ethical socialism" based on Kant's doctrine deeming it an inconsistent theoretical concept and opposing it to the *economic* substantiation of historical necessity (and, moreover, inevitability) of

the socialist transformation of society. However, the socialist system sustained a defeat in peaceful competition with the capitalist system, since it could not ensure higher labour productivity, nor did it bring about democratic transformations. As for the mottos of socialism: shorter working hours, better working conditions, adequate remuneration, sickness and unemployment benefits, medical services, retirement benefits, etc — all of them came to life in the developed capitalist countries³.

All of the above leads us to a conclusion that Kant's ethics, despite its enormous historical significance and applicability in modern times, is still subject to fundamental criticism. His belief that the idea of freedom makes everyone who recognises it a member of transcendental world is, without doubt, inconsistent. Another inconsistent belief is that all of us exist both in this and the other world, since everyone immanently possesses pure reason and a good or free will, which, as well as pure reason, is a thing-in-itself. The existence of the transcendental was questioned by Kant more than once, but he could not do without this merely postulated reality. Freedom, which, according to Kant, belongs not to the empirical — existing in space and time — but to the transcendental (or transcendent) subject is incognisable not only in this form, but in the way it is manifested in real, empirical conditions, whose objective, independent of human consciousness existence is denied by Kant. As German scholar J. Pothast mentions, in Kant's philosophy, freedom is transferred to the area of trans-empirical so that it cannot oppose unfreedom within real social relations. The dichotomy of the two worlds, alias the dichotomy of freedom vs. unfreedom turns into the dichotomy of sciences [3, S. 301].

P.N. Novgorodtsev, a leading representative of Russian Kantianism, while accepting Kant's ethical doctrine in general and agreeing that the moral law is a fact of pure reason, which we recognise in ourselves a priori and which is unconditionally real for us, however, mentions that Kant's categorical imperative is scared of a contact with the outer world and confines moral life to the sphere of pure will [9, p. 177].

A French Kantian, F. Alquié emphasises that Kant is convinced that if every person poses this question themselves, they will reveal this moral fact and discover moral judgment within themselves. If they ask themselves what the object of this moral judgement is and what is truly good, they will answer that nothing is good in this world unless it is a good will [1, p. 35]. Alquié does not agree with this idea, although he shares Kant's perspective that moral consciousness does not depend on education and cultural development. However, unlike Kant, Alquié believes that moral judgements and reflection about moral issues imply a certain level of culture. Thus, not everybody is equal to the task to conclude what is the crucial element of moral consciousness. This argument can hardly be rejected.

³ While orthodox Marxists criticised "ethical socialism" as a doctrine hostile to the interests of the working class; a modest non-orthodox Marxist, L.V. Kononov, wrote "So, what is the positive idea, from the aspiration to solve which ethical socialism emerged as an independent philosophical school of thought? We call this idea positive, since it is real and expresses an actual historical interest" [7, p. 317]. One of the first representatives of ethical socialism was the head of the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism, Hermann Cohen, who insisted that neither ethics, nor socialism should eradicate the idea of God as the crown of their structure. This idea is a belief in the power of the good and hope for the triumph of equity [2, S. 10]. Contemporary social democrats, having rejected the ideology of "scientific socialism", take the position of ethical socialism converting voters from different social layers to their cause.

A. France believes that the highest moral principle should be not equity but leniency. Leniency, from his point of view, eliminates the limitations to a just moral decision. But leniency implies good will, it needs good will even more than equity. Thus, A. France's ideas are not that different from those of Kant, who believed that the categorical imperative is situated beyond compassion, lenience, and pity.

The founder of English analytical philosophy, G. Moore, put forward more serious objections against Kant's ethics. The criterion of the good, as well as the concept of the good itself, is subjective, vague, and unclear. Kant, Moore stresses, "conceives the Moral Law to be an Imperative. And this is a very common mistake. This ought to be, it is assumed, must mean "This is commanded"; nothing, therefore, would be good unless it were commanded; and since commands in this world are liable to be erroneous" [19, p. 128]. Arguing against Kant, Moore stands up for what he considers freer and more concrete ethics, which could not be reduced to an imperative, moreover to a categorical, i.e. unconditional, one. Thus he objects to absolutisation of duty, i.e. the foundation of Kant's ethics. "When we assert that a certain action is our absolute duty, we are asserting that the performance of that action at that time is unique in respect of value. But no dutiful action can possibly have unique value in the sense that it is the sole thing of value in the world" [19, p. 147]⁴.

Moore's arguments deserve a thorough consideration; however, it is obvious that Moore aspires to disprove the significance Kant attached to the concept of duty in ethics. Above, I mentioned that the principle "thou shalt not lie", without doubt, reflects the essence of the categorical imperative, but we cannot exclude a situation when it is the moral feeling, love for humanity or an external need that makes the moral person act contrary to this absolute, in Kant's opinion, duty.

Thus, regardless of how serious the criticism of Kant's ethics is, it can undermine neither the significance of the categorical imperative, nor its importance for ethics, which, for the first time in the history of humanity, was emphasised in Kant's philosophy. Kant raised ethics to the position of being central part of philosophical study of humanity, without objecting that there are other philosophical heights, first of all, epistemology, the founder of which Kant also was, since prior to him, the theory of knowledge was developed by philosophers (J. Locke, É. Condillac) as a theory of *scientific* knowledge or philosophy of science. However, it is the doctrine of morality that is the most important theoretical achievement of Kant's philosophy, for it was he who revealed the origins of moral consciousness. Morality has deep roots stretching back to ancient history. It is absolute and this absoluteness is manifested as a universal system of rules of conduct, without which the universal history of humanity would not exist. It holds true for Immanuel Kant.

⁴ Commenting on the above statement Moore writes: " In order to show that any action is a duty, it is necessary to know both what are the other conditions, which will, conjointly with it, determine its effects... Ethics, therefore, is quite unable to give us a list of duties" [19, p. 149]. However, he admits here may be some possibility of showing which among the alternatives, *likely to occur to any one*, will produce the greatest sum of good [19, p. 149]. Therefore, although his objections point to the Achilles' heel of ethical rigorism, he does not disprove Kant's principal idea: ethics should be a doctrine of the due; the due is an action, the maxim of which can be universally accepted.

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About author

Theodor I. Oizerman, fellow of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy, e-mail: s-nickolsky@yandex.ru