

what one calls ‘duty’ is an empty concept, we can at least indicate what we are thinking in the concept of duty and what this concept means.⁴²

Because the universality of the law in accordance with which effects happen constitutes that which is really called *nature* in the most general sense (in accordance with its form), i.e., the existence of things insofar as it is determined in accordance with universal laws, thus the universal imperative of duty can also be stated as follows: *So act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.*

Now we will enumerate⁴³ some duties, in accordance with their usual division into duties toward ourselves and toward other human beings, and into perfect and imperfect duties:*

[Ak 4:422] (1) One person, through a series of evils that have accumulated to the point of hopelessness, feels weary of life but is still so far in possession of his reason that he can ask himself whether it might be contrary to the duty to himself to take his own life. Now he tries out whether the maxim of his action could become a universal law of nature. But his maxim is: ‘From self-love, I make it my principle to shorten my life when by longer term it threatens more ill than it promises agreeableness’. The question is whether this principle of self-love could become a universal law of nature. But then one soon sees that a nature whose law it was to destroy life through the same feeling⁴⁴ whose vocation it is to impel the furtherance of life would contra-

[Ak4:421] *Here one must note well that I reserve the division of duties entirely for a future *metaphysics of morals*; the division here therefore stands only as a discretionary one (to order my examples). For the rest, I understand by a perfect duty that which permits no exception to the advantage of inclination, and I do have *perfect duties* that are not merely external but also internal, which runs contrary to the use of words common in the schools; but I do not mean to defend that here, because for my aim it is all the same whether or not one concedes it to me. [Cf. *Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:240, 391–98, 413, and the detailed taxonomy of duties of virtue, Ak 6:417–68. The “use of words common in the schools,” according to which perfect duties are externally enforceable actions, is based on Samuel Pufendorf (1632–1694), *De Jure Naturale* (1672), I.1.19–20. But Pufendorf’s distinction was anticipated by Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) and had been taken up also by, among others, Christian Thomasius (1655–1728) and J. G. Sulzer.]

42. *sagen wolle*

43. *herzählen*, which could also be translated “reckon” or “calculate”

44. *Empfindung*

dict itself, and thus could not subsist as nature; hence that maxim could not possibly obtain as a universal law of nature, and consequently it entirely contradicts the supreme principle of all duty.

(2) Another sees himself pressured by distress into borrowing money. He knows very well that he will not be able to pay, but he also sees that nothing will be lent him if he does not firmly promise to pay at a determinate time. He wants to make such a promise; yet he has conscience enough to ask himself: “Is it not impermissible and contrary to duty to get out of distress in such a way?” Supposing he nevertheless resolved on it, his maxim would be stated as follows: ‘If I believe myself to be in pecuniary distress, then I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, although I know this will never happen’. Now this principle of self-love, or of what is expedient for oneself, might perhaps be united with my entire future welfare, yet the question now is: “Is it right?” I thus transform this claim⁴⁵ of self-love into a universal law and set up the question thus: “How would it stand if my maxim became a universal law?” Yet I see right away that it could never be valid as a universal law of nature and still agree with itself, but rather it would necessarily contradict itself. For the universality of a law that everyone who believes himself to be in distress could promise whatever occurred to him with the intention of not keeping it would make impossible the promise and the end one might have in making it, since no one would believe that anything has been promised him, but rather would laugh about every such utterance as vain pretense.

(3) A third finds in himself a talent, which could, by means of some cultivation, make him into a human being who is useful for all sorts of aims. But he sees himself as in comfortable circumstances and sooner prefers to indulge⁴⁶ in gratification than to trouble himself with the expansion and improvement of his fortunate natural predispositions. Yet he still asks whether, apart from the agreement of his maxim of neglecting his gifts of nature with his propensity to amusement, it also agrees with what one calls ‘duty’. Then he sees that, although a nature could still subsist in accordance with such a universal law, though then the human being (like the South Sea Islanders) would think only of letting his talents rust and applying his life merely to idleness, amusement, procreation, in a word, to enjoyment; yet it is impossible for him to **will** that this should become a universal law of nature, or that it should be implanted in us as such by natural instinct. For as a rational being he necessarily wills that all the faculties in him should be

[AK 4:423]

45. *Zumutung*

46. 1785: “and he prefers it that he indulge”

developed, because they are serviceable and given⁴⁷ to him for all kinds of possible aims.

(4)⁴⁸ Yet a *fourth* — for whom it is going well, while he sees that others have to struggle with great hardships (with which he could well help them) — thinks: “What has it to do with me? Let each be as happy as heaven wills, or as he can make himself, I will not take anything from him or even envy him; only I do not want to contribute to his welfare or to his assistance in distress!” Now to be sure, if such a way of thinking were to become a universal law of nature, then the human race could well subsist, and without doubt still better than when everyone chatters about sympathetic participation⁴⁹ and benevolence, and even on occasion exerts himself to practice them, but, on the contrary also deceives wherever he can,⁵⁰ sells out, or otherwise infringes on the right of human beings. But although it is possible that a universal law of nature could well subsist in accordance with that maxim, yet it is impossible to **will** that such a principle should be valid without exception⁵¹ as a natural law. For a will that resolved on this would conflict with itself, since the case could sometimes arise in which he needs the love and sympathetic participation of others, and where, through such a natural law arising from his own will, he would rob himself of all the hope of assistance that he wishes for himself.

Now these are some of the many actual duties, or at least of what we take to be duties, whose partitioning⁵² from the single principle just adduced

[Ak 4:424]

47. “and given” added in 1786

48. Kant’s text, although it emphasizes the word “fourth,” omits the (4) required by the parallel with his three other examples.

49. *Teilnehmung*

50. 1785: “wherever one can”

51. *allenthalben*

52. *Abteilung*; some editors correct this to *Ableitung*, “derivation.” In favor of the emendation is that if Kant meant ‘classification,’ one would expect him to use *Einteilung* (“division,” as he did above, Ak 4:421); *Abteilung* refers more properly to one of the parts or subcategories marked out by a division or classification than it does to the act of dividing or classifying or to the entire system of classification; where it does refer to an act of dividing, *abteilen* means the partitioning off of one space from another, and not the creation of a system of classification. The construction *Abteilung aus dem einigen Prinzip* is also awkward, in the same way that this English translation of it is; and no such construction is found anywhere else in Kant’s writings. Further, Kant did speak earlier of being able to “derive” (*ableiten*) all imperatives of duty from a single categorical imperative (Ak 4:421). But despite all these reasons, the emendation to *Ableitung* (“derivation”)

clearly meets the eye. One must *be able to will* that a maxim of our action should become a universal law: this is the canon of the moral judgment of this action in general. Some actions are so constituted that their maxim cannot even be *thought* without contradiction as a universal law of nature, much less could one *will* that it *ought* to become one. With others, that internal impossibility is not to be encountered, but it is impossible to *will*

remains doubtful. Against it is the following: Kant goes on in the present paragraph to discuss the relation of his principle only to the *classification* of duties, not to their *derivation*. Further, it is not at all clear that when Kant spoke of deriving duties from a single categorical imperative, he meant to restrict the formula of that imperative to the two formulations that have been presented so far. He may well have meant that a derivation of duties would require the entire system of formulas, first introduced later at Ak 4:436. His practice in the *Metaphysics of Morals* strongly suggests the latter position. There Kant does propose to derive an entire system of ethical duties; but only the duty of beneficence (which pertains only to the fourth example here) is related to anything in the present formula of the moral law (Ak 6:453). This is possible only because the maxim of pursuing one's own happiness (and the consequent volition of others' voluntary assistance, as required to achieve this end) can be ascribed to all rational beings, so that the principle of morality can require them to adopt it in a universalizable form. Apart from this unique case, universalizability enables us only to disqualify certain specific maxims, and cannot yield anything like a positive duty (e.g., to refrain from suicide, keep promises, or develop talents). All fifteen of the other ethical duties explicitly enumerated there (including three of the four that are exemplified here) are derived by appeal to the second formula, that of humanity as end in itself (first stated in the *Groundwork* at Ak 4:429). Kant says that suicide is a "debasement of humanity in one's person" (Ak 6:422–423); the duty to develop one's natural perfection is "bound up with the end of humanity in our own person" (Ak 6:391–92; cf. 6:444–46). In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant treats promising under the heading of externally enforceable right rather than of ethics (as his use here of the term 'right' might also imply). There Kant even denies that it is either possible or necessary to demonstrate that promises ought to be kept (Ak 6:273). The principle of right is distinct from the supreme principle of morality (Ak 6:230); but the fundamental right (the innate human right to freedom) is said "to belong to every human being by virtue of his humanity" (Ak 6:237). But he does discuss the ethical duty not to lie under the heading of strict duties to oneself, where it is said to be a violation of "the humanity in his own person" because it uses his capacity to communicate as a mere means (Ak 6:429). Kant's definitive presentation of the duties enumerated here thus has far less affinity with the present discussion of them (based on the formula of the law of nature) than it does with his discussion of them below in connection with the second formula, that of humanity as end in itself (Ak 4:429–30).

that their maxims should be elevated to the universality of a natural law, because such a will would contradict itself. One easily sees that the first conflict with strict or narrow (unremitting) duty, the second only with wide (meritorious) duty, and thus all duties regarding the kind of obligation (not the object of their action) have been completely set forth⁵³ through these examples in their dependence on the one principle.

Now if we attend to ourselves in every transgression of a duty, then we find that we do not actually will that our maxim should become a universal law, for that is impossible for us, but rather will that its opposite should remain a law generally; yet we take the liberty of making an *exception* for ourselves, or (even only for this once) for the advantage of our inclination. Consequently, if we weighed everything from one and the same point of view, namely that of reason, then we would encounter a contradiction in our own will, namely that objectively a certain principle should be necessary as a universal law and yet subjectively that it should not be universally valid, but rather that it should admit of exceptions. But since we consider our action at one time from a point of view that accords entirely with reason, and then, however, also the same action from the point of view of a will affected by inclination, there is actually no contradiction here, but only a resistance of inclination against the precept of reason (*antagonismus*), through which the universality of the principle (*universalitas*) is transformed into a mere general validity (*generalitas*), so that the practical principle of reason is supposed to meet the maxim halfway. Now although this cannot be justified in our own impartially rendered judgment, it proves that we actually recognize the validity of the categorical imperative and (with every respect for it) allow ourselves only a few exceptions, which are, as it seems to us, insignificant and forced upon us.

[Ak 4:425]

Thus we have established at least this much: that if duty is a concept that is to contain significance and actual legislation for our actions, then this duty could be expressed only in categorical imperatives, but by no means in hypothetical ones; likewise, which is already quite a bit, we have exhibited distinctly and for every use the content of the categorical imperative which would have to contain the principle of all duty (if there is such a thing at all). But we are still not ready to prove *a priori* that there actually is such an imperative, that there is a practical law which commands for itself absolutely and without any incentives, and that it is a duty to follow this law.

With the aim of attaining that, it is of the utmost importance to let this serve as a warning that one must not let it enter his mind to try to derive the

53. 1785: "are completely set forth"