

Interpreting the Formulations of Kant's Categorical Imperative

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Introduction

The concept of the categorical imperative is central to Kant's moral philosophy; the categorical imperative is the supreme principle of morality in his framework. In the *Groundwork*, he claims, "There is ... only a single categorical imperative" (*GMS* 4:421)¹. He then introduces the *Formula of Universal Law* which seems to be the decisive formulation of the categorical imperative. However, the Universal Law Formula is not the only formulation that Kant develops throughout his work. There are a number of formulas all of which are said to be *one and the same* supreme principle yet, at the same time, differ widely in language and content². Consequently, it is unclear what exact functions the different variants have, especially in relation to the Universal Law Formula, or whether they are equivalent in some way. There seems to be general agreement among commentators that Kant offers more than only one formula for the categorical imperative. The scholarly controversies focus mainly on the exact number and then on their relationship to each other. The examination of these issues is of utmost importance for full understanding of the concept of the categorical imperative.

In this paper, I argue that there are three formulas of the categorical imperative in total – the *Formula of Universal Law*, the *Formula of Humanity* and the *Formula of Kingdom of Ends*. In contrast to several scholars who take some formulas to be subordinate to others, I argue further that all three formulas enjoy equal priority.

The paper proceeds as follows. First I investigate crucial passages in the *Groundwork* and the problems that result from them in order to provide a basis for the discussion of the controversies in the secondary literature. After a brief outline of the debates in Kant scholarship, I focus on the first major question, the question of the number of formulas. Following Ebbinghaus, I maintain that the principle of autonomy should not be regarded as a formula of the categorical imperative; rather, it serves as a principle that justifies the existence of the categorical imperative but is not an imperative itself. Next, I examine the so-called *Formula of Law of Nature* by demonstrating it is a mere thought-experiment to illustrate the Universal Law Formula. Finally, I investigate more closely the question of hierarchization. Here I follow Baker's (1988, 395) idea that the formulas' elliptical nature justifies giving an equal priority to all three

1 All translations of Kant are from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant.

2 All formulas appear several times in the *Groundwork*, differing in language. In this paper, "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" is taken as the example formulation of the *Universal Law Formula* (*GMS* 4:421); "Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature" for the *Natural Law Formula* (*GMS* 4:421); "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" for the *Humanity Formula* (*GMS* 4:429); "[T]he idea of the will of every rational being as a will giving universal law" for the *Autonomy Formula* (*GMS* 4:431); "[A]ct in accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a merely possible kingdom of ends" as the *Kingdom of Ends Formula* (*GMS* 4:439).

formulas but I reject her claim that the formulas are also identical.

1. Kant's Formulas of the Categorical Imperative in Context

The categorical imperative is the supreme principle of morality; it is an objective law given *a priori* to every rational being by her own reason. This universal law is supposed to enable human beings to deduce further concrete duties by serving as a benchmark to test our maxims, or subjective principles of action³.

The first formula Kant develops is the *Universal Law Formula* (see *GMS* 4:402, 4:421). It commands that we consider whether a maxim for an action could serve as a universal law, i.e. as a principle to be followed by every rational being at all times. Kant provides two deductions of the Universal Law Formula in the *Groundwork*: in the first section on the concept of the good will and in the second section on the concept of the categorical imperative itself. This formulation focuses on the universal law and on the premise that a maxim must be willed as such, i.e. for its own sake. The Universal Law Formula appears in direct connection to Kant's claim that there is only one categorical imperative. This claim, however, is the major cause of the controversies surrounding the categorical imperative, since the appearance of subsequent formulas seems to undermine it.

The *Law of Nature Formula* appears immediately after the Universal Law Formula in the second section of the *Groundwork*. Kant writes, "Since the universality of law in accordance with which effects take place constitutes what is properly called nature in the most general sense [...] the universal imperative of duty can also go as follows: *act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature.*" (*GMS* 4:421) The only difference between the two formulations is the substitution of *universal law* with *law of nature*. Consequently, one could ask how these two seemingly distinct terms are interrelated and to what extent the two formulas differ from each other. What remains remarkable however is that it is the Natural Law Formula and not the Universal Law Formula that Kant claims to be the form of the supreme moral law and on the basis of which he attempts to derive his four example duties. The question of the role of Natural Law Formula will be investigated more closely in the following section.

In a next step Kant develops the *Formula of Humanity*, deriving it from the concept of the categorical imperative itself as he did previously with the Universal Law Formula. Although (almost)⁴ all formulas command that we test our maxims, how this is to be done differ widely. The Humanity Formula requires us to treat ourselves and others as ends in themselves and not merely as means.⁵ This implies that every human being has a certain value. Accordingly, it is our duty to treat ourselves and others with respect and not to instrumentalize any rational being in order to reach individual goals, and thereby neglect her value as an end-in-itself. Whereas the language of the Universal Law Formula and Natural Law Formula is very similar, the Humanity Formula seems to have nothing in common with them in language or content.

3 Kant says, "A *maxim* is the subjective principle of volition ..." (*GMS* 4:400)

4 This point is problematic in the case of the Autonomy Formula as will be shown later.

5 "The practical imperative will therefore be the following: *So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.*" (*GMS* 4:429)

Nevertheless Kant claims that the Humanity Formula and the Universal Law Formula are one and the same (see *GMS* 4:437f.). Thus, it appears once more that the different formulations are interrelated in some way.

Kant then develops a third practical principle: The *Formula of the Autonomy* which is “the idea of the will of every rational being as a will giving universal law” (*GMS* 4:431). This last formula has also been disputed since it is not clear whether the idea of an autonomous, self-legislative will can be interpreted as a genuine formula of the categorical imperative at all.

Apart from the more specific issues briefly addressed above, the question remains however why Kant developed so many obviously dissimilar formulas when there is supposed to be only *one* categorical imperative. Instead of withdrawing this claim, Kant attempts to draw a connection between the formulas, proving that they all represent the categorical imperative. The central passage dealing with that attempt can be found in the *Groundwork*, “The above three ways of representing the principle of morality are at bottom only so many formulae of the very same law, and any one of them of itself unites the other two in it” (*GMS* 4:436). Kant admits that there is a difference between the formulations that is *subjective* rather than *objective* in nature. In order to explain this difference, he introduces three distinct aspects of the concept of maxims: form, matter and the complete determination of them. Each of these aspects can now be connected to a certain formula, i.e. the Natural Law Formula constitutes the form, Humanity Formula constitutes the matter and Kingdom of Ends Formula determines a totality of maxims. The form of the practical law focuses on the universality of the categorical imperative, whereas the matter adds an end to it, which is human being itself as described in the Humanity Formula. This aspect has been thoroughly examined and interpreted in various ways. For the purpose of this essay, it serves as a basis for resolving the difficulty posed by the hierarchization of the formulas. In Section 4 I appeal to the distinction between form, matter and the complete determination of the maxims in order to show that all three formulas share an equal position in classification.

2. Debates in the Scholarship

The two major controversies that I will focus on are concerned with (i) the number of the formulas and (ii) their hierarchization. Scholarly positions on these issues will be briefly presented in this section.

(i) Paton (1962, 152f.) and Brinkmann (2003 283ff.) both argue for a total of five formulas: the *Universal Law Formula*, the *Natural Law Formula*, the *Humanity Formula*, the *Autonomy Formula* and the *Kingdom of Ends Formula*. As mentioned above, the status of the Autonomy Formula is not certain. For instance, Ebbinghaus (1959) excludes the principle of autonomy as a formula from his count, emphasizing its exceptional function as a condition under which the other formulas can exist (Geismann, 2002, 381). His categorization includes only the four remaining formulations. By contrast, Brinkmann and Porcheddu also recognize the special features of the principle of autonomy but interpret it as one of Kant's intended formulas. I examine the controversy about the Autonomy Formula more closely in the following section and I argue that the Autonomy Formula must be excluded as a formula.

A second formula to be investigated in more detail is the *Natural Law Formula*. Paton (1962, 192ff.) subordinates the Natural Law Formula to the Universal Law Formula. I will demonstrate however

that the Natural Law Formula and the Universal Law Formula can be regarded as one and the same formula.

(ii) Finally there is the problem of hierarchization. Although Paton and Brinkmann, for example, agree on the number of formulas, they develop a completely different hierarchy of formulas. Paton (1962, 152f.) suggests the Universal Law Formula, the Humanity Formula and the Autonomy Formula are the supreme formulas of the moral law. The Natural Law Formula is subordinated to the Universal Law Formula and the Kingdom of Ends Formula is subordinated to the Autonomy Formula. In contrast to that, Brinkmann (2003, 283ff.) argues for only two supreme formulas, the Universal Law Formula and the Autonomy Formula. All other formulas are supposedly subordinated to them. However, I contend that a categorization of that kind does not fully appreciate the functions of the various formulas. Judith Baker's concept of *elliptical* formulas provides a completely different view on that matter in that she questions the demotion of specific formulas (Baker, 1988, 390). On the basis of her approach, I will explain the contribution each of the formulas makes to understanding the overall concept of a categorical imperative.

3. Counting the Formulas

3.1 The Formula of the Autonomy

In this section I argue against construing the principle of autonomy as a formula of the categorical imperative. I show that the principle of autonomy fulfills a function that differs from the functions of the other formulas.

According to many interpretations the principle of autonomy is superordinated over the other formulas. Paton (1962, 154) justifies its special value by pointing to its focus on the self-legislative function of the human will. Furthermore, he says the fact that in the third section of the *Groundwork* the principle offers evidence for the categorical imperative and plays a major role in the *Critique of Practical Reason*⁶ demonstrates its preeminent status in comparison to the Humanity Formula and the Universal Law Formula⁷. Paton (1962, 218) restates the Autonomy Formula thus, "So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxim." This formulation is surprising since it is nowhere to be found in the *Groundwork* or in any other work by Kant. It appears that Paton is referring to the following passage:

This lawgiving must, however, be found in every rational being himself and be able to arise from his will, the principle of which is, accordingly: to do no action on any other maxim than one such that it would be consistent with it to be a universal law, and hence to act only so that the will could regard itself as at the same time giving universal law through its maxim.
(GMS 4:434)

6 Opinions about the importance the formulas in later Kantian works differ widely. Brinkmann suggests that the Natural Law Formula, the Humanity Formula and the Kingdom of Ends Formula are essential in the *Critique of Practical Reason* at all (Brinkmann, *ibid.*, p. 303.).

7 Similarly, Wood and Schönecker claim that the Universal Law Formula and the Natural Law Formula lack substance which is a problem that is supposedly solved by the Humanity Formula and the Autonomy Formula. According to his view, both are necessary specifications of the Universal Law Formula. In this way, once again the Autonomy Formula is ascribed superior status (Schönecker/Wood, *ibid.*, p. 139f.).

Two aspects are quite remarkable here: first, this formulation is not an explicit imperative and secondly, the principle of autonomy is clearly preceded by the Universal Law Formula. It is especially the first aspect that casts doubt on the legitimacy of the Autonomy Formula as an independent formula of the categorical imperative as this formulation is not even an imperatival, prescriptive, expression; instead it is merely a *descriptive* principle. This does not undermine the importance of the idea of an autonomous will but it does call into question its claim to be a formula of the categorical *imperative*.

Brinkmann (2003, 288f.) argues for an even stronger view of the principle of autonomy by conceiving of it as a second main formulation of the categorical imperative on par with the Universal Law Formula while simultaneously demoting all other formulas. However, he also recognizes the particularities of the Autonomy Formula. He describes this issue as follows: the formula of autonomy takes a special position within Kant's moral philosophy since it is not given as an imperative but rather serves as a justification of the categorical imperative in the third section of the *Groundwork* (Brinkmann, 2003, 283ff.). Despite this, Brinkmann (2003, 297) regards the principle as a formula. According to his reading both major formulas are equal in practical application. But practical applicability of the Autonomy Formula is problematic given that it is merely descriptive and not prescriptive. "Act as if your will were self-legislative" does not offer practical guidance whereas "act as if your maxims were to serve as a universal law" offers a graspable rule for human actions. I think the derivability of duties from the principle of autonomy is not as self-evident as it is in the case of the Universal Law Formula and the Humanity Formula.

Additional reasons for excluding the Autonomy Formula from the count of the formulas are given by Julius Ebbinghaus (1959, 160) who does not regard the principle of autonomy as an independent formula. He argues that the idea of an autonomous will does not illuminate the content of the categorical imperative. Autonomy is rather a *condition* under which a human being can be an end-in-itself. It also relates the will to the kingdom of ends, according to Geismann's discussion of Ebbinghaus (Geismann, 2002, 381f.). Thus, the principle of autonomy is crucial for the other formulas in various ways, but it differs in form and function⁸. Similarly, Porcheddu (2016, 56f.) claims that the principle of autonomy describes the requirement that practical legislation must originate in the human will but it does not prescribe or prohibit maxims. It has no "action-guiding" character⁹.

These positions further underline my claim that the Autonomy Formula is not a formula of the categorical imperative. These points about descriptive vs prescriptive semantics and the special function of the principle of autonomy support the view that the idea of an autonomous will is not an independent formula. Neither in the *Groundwork* nor in any other of Kant's works does it appear as an explicit imperative¹⁰. As a descriptive formulation it is missing the action-guiding character that is a central aspect

8 This view resembles Klaus Reich's position in his book, *Kant und die Ethik der Griechen*, which Ebbinghaus refers to in the exchange of letters which Geismann examines in his article.

9 Note that Porcheddu nonetheless argues that Kant did intend the principle to be an independent formula.

10 Interpretations may vary concerning this claim. Brinkmann for example identifies one imperatival formulation in the *Critique of Practical Reason* as the Autonomy Formula (see p. 30 of the Akademie edition of *Critique of Practical Reason*). The formulation in question, however, is quite similar to the

of imperatival expressions. Even scholars who argue for a Formula of the Autonomy recognize its peculiar status compared to all other formulas. Thus, in the following I will exclude the principle of autonomy as an independent formula of the categorical imperative

3.2 The Formula of Law of Nature

Whereas in most classifications, e.g. Paton's (1962, 152f.) and Schönecker and Wood's (2011, 130), the Natural Law Formula appears as an independent formula, I argue that it is to be regarded as a mere equivalent of the Universal Law Formula. In the second section of the *Groundwork* Kant deduces the Natural Law Formula directly from the Universal Law Formula, using it as a substitute for the Universal Law Formula in what follows. It is surprising that Kant says the Natural Law Formula constitutes the form of the categorical imperative in his summary instead of the initial formula the *Universal* Law Formula which would have been the more obvious choice (see *GMS* 4:436). In light of Kant's persistent appeal to the Natural Law Formula, the formula often appears to be a subordinated and, most importantly, independent formula in many categorizations in the secondary literature. The separation of the two formulas is questionable however since Kant himself seems to use both formulations interchangeably.

First, the context in which the Natural Law Formula appears supports the idea that the Universal Law Formula and the Natural Law Formula should be treated as one and the same formula. The introductory words preceding the formula are, "... the universal imperative of duty can *also* go as follows ..." (*GMS* 4:421) (*italics added*). The Natural Law Formula is developed immediately after the introduction of the Universal Law Formula. Therefore, Kant's choice of words here implies they are equivalent: The universal imperative can be represented *either* by the Universal Law Formula *or also* by the Natural Law Formula.

Furthermore, the only difference in language between them is the substitution of the *universal law* with the *law of nature*. The difference between a practical law and a law of nature will not be analyzed here – a fully worked-out account of that difference is beyond the scope of this paper – but the point of this substitution must be examined closer. It seems that the Natural Law Formula is a mere thought-experiment intended to illustrate the meaning of the Universal Law Formula by emphasizing the *mandatory* character of the supreme moral principle. This way, the Natural Law Formula neither adds new aspects to the categorical imperative unlike the Humanity Formula which represents the maxim's matter, nor does it serve any other function. The Natural Law Formula is a *type* of the Universal Law Formula, a way of *imagining* full compliance with the moral law, thus Paton (1962, 173) stresses the formula says to "act, *as if...*" (*emphasis added*) our choice were determined by a law of nature. The Universal Law Formula emphasizes moral *freedom* since every rational being, partly determined by its drives and not by reason alone, can decide whether to follow the supreme moral principle or not. The Natural Law Formula emphasizes moral *necessity* (Paton (1962, 189)), the *universality* of both natural laws and moral laws.

My view differs from Paton's who subordinates the Natural Law Formula to the Universal Law Formula. I contend that both formulas represent one and the same aspect of the categorical imperative. The

Universal Law Formula and it contains the idea of an autonomous will only implicitly.

Natural Law Formula poses an analogy between practical laws and laws of nature in order to make the idea underlying the Universal Law Formula more comprehensible and thus it indeed brings the categorical imperative closer to human intuition. This function of the Natural Law Formula proves the identity of both formulas. Accordingly, the two formulations will be treated as one and the same formula in the remainder of the paper. Thus, of five initial formulas of the categorical imperative only three are left: the Universal Law Formula, the Humanity Formula, and Kingdom of Ends Formula.

4. The Problem of Hierarchization

I have shown that the Autonomy Formula is not a formula of the categorical imperative. Furthermore, the Natural Law Formula and Universal Law Formula can be treated as one and the same formula. We now have to examine the hierarchization of the remaining formulas, the Universal Law Formula, the Humanity Formula and the Kingdom of Ends Formula. I follow Baker (1988) in regarding these formulas as having equal status. However, Baker also aims at demonstrating that they are *identical*; I maintain that the identity of the formulas cannot be inferred from this argument.

Scholars have exerted much effort in super- and subordinating the respective formulas in order to properly categorize them. However, I contend that these attempts at hierarchization are not only unnecessary but they even obstruct a full understanding of the concept of the moral law. To be sure, hierarchical ordering seems to be appropriate given Kant's explanation of the formulas' connection: "the ... three ways of representing the principle of morality are at bottom only so many formulae of the very same law ..." (*GMS* 4:436). So subordinating the formulas to some one major formula appears to be what Kant intended. Nonetheless, in what follows he explains that every formula expresses a different aspect of the categorical imperative, i.e. the Natural Law Formula and the Universal Law Formula constitute the form, the Humanity Formula represents the matter and the Kingdom of Ends Formula enables a complete determination of maxims. Since all three indeed represent different aspects which Kant obviously considers equally important, a demotion of any of the formulas is untenable.

This argumentation is further supported by the way the formulas are developed in the *Groundwork*. Both the Universal Law Formula and the Humanity Formula are derived from the concept of the categorical imperative. Hence the Universal Law Formula is not the basis for the Humanity Formula. If both of these formulas are on par, why should the *Kingdom of Ends Formula* be subordinated to any of them? From this point of view a hierarchization no longer seems plausible.

Judith Baker (1988) offers good reason to uphold this reading. She describes the formulas as *elliptical* since every formulation offers a new perspective on the categorical imperative or, more extensively, on the concept of morality itself, without which the idea would be incomplete and thus unstable (Baker, 1988, 395). Consequently, all of the formulas are to be seen as equal and she explicitly warns against demoting any of them (Baker, 1988, 390). As a result, according to Baker (1988, 392), the variety of formulations, by virtue of their elliptical character, makes the categorical imperative possible at all. The formulas which were considered subordinated do not serve merely as illustrations but rather independently add motivational aspects to the concept of morality. The Universal Law Formula offers the

core principle of the categorical imperative but fails to provide a reason why people should act according to it. This motivational aspect lies within the purview of the Humanity Formula and Kingdom of Ends Formula. Because of human agents' imperfection, their partial determination by drives and not by reason alone, they need an end for acting morally which, according to the Humanity Formula, is the human being itself.

Furthermore, a prescriptive law requires an authority (Baker, 1988, 404f.). The aspect of an authority is given by the Autonomy Formula according to Baker (1988, 403f.). This however cannot be the case according to my interpretation since I exclude the Autonomy Formula as a viable formula of the categorical imperative. Thus, another formula must be found to fulfil this task, the only formula left being the Kingdom of Ends Formula which also expresses the idea of autonomy¹¹. Textual support for my claim that Kingdom of Ends Formula is the formula adding the aspect of authority is given by Kant himself when he claims this formula determines a totality of maxims (see *GMS* 4:436). The focus should thus lie on Kingdom of Ends Formula as a genuine formula of the categorical imperative instead of the mere principle of autonomy which is not formulated as an imperative at all. The Kingdom of Ends Formula includes the idea of a self-legislative will and thereby answers the question of the authority behind our actions, which is we ourselves. The motivation to act according to the moral law is not only given by the fact that we ourselves are the lawgivers but the Kingdom of Ends formula also captures the idea of the fulfillment of the moral law as a world in which all human beings live together in harmony resembling our image of happiness. We might never reach this kingdom given the imperfection of our actions and our character, but we may nevertheless approximate it as a result of our efforts (see *GMS* 4:438f.). The representation of the Kingdom of Ends along with the idea of human beings as their own lawgivers are what motivate moral action.

Baker's account (1988, 400–406) gives reason to regard the formulas as equally important and demonstrates that Kant's claim about one single moral law can be maintained. She holds all formulas to be identical as each of the formulas presupposes the other two and all of them are required in order to fully determine what the moral law is. Only if all “slots” (Baker 404), all possible perspectives on the concept of the moral law, are filled can the idea of such a law be fully understood. She adds that imperatives include something we care about and we cannot claim to care about the principle of one of the formulas if we neglect the principles expressed by the other two (Baker 401). For instance, if we claim to care about treating people as ends in themselves, we ought to care about the realization of the universal law or the Kingdom of Ends. *Identity* here means that the principles “come down to the same thing” (Baker 401). I agree that the formulas enjoy equal priority and are necessary to fully grasp the concept of the moral law. However, this does not entail that the formulas are *identical*. Indeed, the formulas differ in language and content precisely because they add *different* aspects to the overall concept of the moral law. Neither their equal status nor the fact that all three formulas presuppose each other imply their identity. They only

¹¹ Note that Baker (389) differentiates between the Autonomy Formula and the Kingdom of Ends Formula but nonetheless holds that Kant uses both formulas indifferently which leads her to take the principle of autonomy as most clearly expressed in the Autonomy Formula.

demonstrate that there is one overall, albeit abstract, concept of the moral law that is only fully determined by the three distinct formulas of the categorical imperative.

Conclusion

In Kant scholarship the mere number of formulas of the categorical imperative as well as their hierarchization have stirred controversy. I have provided evidence that the Autonomy Formula is not a genuine formula of the categorical imperative despite its distinct, yet crucial, status. Additionally, I have argued that the Natural Law Formula is identical to the Universal Law Formula for its function as a thought-experiment does not justify giving it the status of an independent formula. Thus, the Universal Law Formula, the Humanity Formula and the Kingdom of Ends Formula constitute the formulas of the categorical imperative. Since the arguments I have offered are based mainly on the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, further investigation would include other works in Kant's moral philosophy such as the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

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