

9. CHAPTER 9: ARE THERE ABSOLUTE MORAL RULES?

9.1. Kant and The Categorical Imperative

Emanuel Kant believed that morality is a matter of following *absolute rules* -- rules that admit no exceptions, that must be followed come what may.

"Hypothetical imperatives" tell us what to do *provided that* we have the relevant desires.

Because the binding force of the "ought to" depends on our having the relevant desire, we can *escape* its force simply by renouncing the desire.

Moral obligations, by contrast, do not depend on our having particular desires. Moral

requirements are *categorical*: they have the form, "you ought to do such as such, *period*."

Kant holds that, just as hypothetical "oughts" are possible because we have desires, categorical

"oughts" are possible because we have reason. Categorical "oughts" are binding on rational

agents *simply because they are rational*.

The Categorical Imperative. Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

9.2. Absolute Rules and the Duty Not to Lie

being a moral agent, then, means guiding ones conduct by "universal laws" -- moral rules that hold, without exception, in all circumstances.

Lying:

you should only do those actions that conform to rules that you could will to be adopted universally.

If you were to lie, you would be following the rule "It is permissible to lie."

This rule could not be adopted universally, because it would be self defeating: people would stop believing one another, and then it would do no good to lie.

Therefore, you should not lie.

Some situations provide an example of where an exception is in order. Kant indicates that we would be morally responsible for any bad consequences as a result of our lying. Suppose, however, that our telling the truths results and in a morally reprehensible outcome. Kant seems to assume that we would be blameless. This argument is not very convincing.

9.3. Conflicts Between Rules

So long as there are at least two "absolute rules," whenever they might be, the possibility will always exist that they might come into conflict. And that makes the view of those rules as *absolute* impossible to maintain.

9.4. Another Look at Kant's Basic Idea

Kant thinks The Categorical Comparative is binding on rational agents simply because they are rational -- in other words, a person who did not accept this principal would be guilty not merely of being immoral but of being irrational.

If Kant was not the first to recognize this he was the first to make it the cornerstone of a fully worked-out system of morals. That was his great contribution.

Rules, even within a Kantian framework, *need not* be regarded as absolute. All that is required by Kant's basic idea is that when we violate a rule, we do so for a reason that we would be willing for everyone to accept, were they in our position.