



## Kulturecke

### The Categorical Imperative

by Paul A. Schons and John van Ingen



An approach to ethical standards from 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany continues to have strong adherents but also distressed detractors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Philosophers, theologians, political scientists, sociologists and psychologists throughout the world continue to analyze, ponder and debate Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative. Non-specialists tend to have heard about something called the categorical imperative but relatively few are familiar with details of Kant's monumental statements about guiding moral actions.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) had shaken the world of philosophy and theology with his book, *Die Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*The Critique of Pure Reason*) in 1781. In that book he questioned many of the foundations of Western thinking on what can be proven concerning the nature of reality and, probably more importantly, the limits of the human mind's ability to comprehend the fullness of reality.

In the mid 1780s Kant focused much of his attention on the question of the foundations of morality and began to ask himself if one could arrive at ethically correct thinking using only natural human capacities. The standard approach to that question had been the doctrine of virtue and happiness as developed in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Kant found Aristotle's answers to be lacking in certain key areas and undertook a new approach to the moral question. Kant's first book on the subject was the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* in 1785 (*Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*). He then continued to refine his thinking on the subject and offered, among other writings, *Die Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* in 1788 (*The Critique of Practical Reason*), *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* in 1792 (*Religion within the Boundaries of Reason Alone*) and *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* in 1797 (*The Metaphysics of Morals*).

As a proponent of the movement called *Die Aufklärung* (*Enlightenment*), Kant hoped to be able to develop an understanding of ethics through unaided human reason. He worked hard in his writing to develop a philosophical foundation which would establish the human person's inborn capacity for reasoning under a common basic understanding of morality that plays a central role in the human person's individual judgments regarding right and wrong action. Kant thought that, if one carefully considers the thinking of the average person about morality, and if one properly analyzes that thinking, then the product of that analysis amounts to the most basic principle of morality, which he named the categorical imperative.

He presented the categorical imperative in several ways, but assured us that they were all simply variant expressions of the same principle. The statement of the categorical imperative found in the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* which is probably the closest to and most accessible to our way of thinking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is, "Handle so, dass du die Menschheit sowohl in deiner Person, als in der Person eines jeden anderen zugleich als Zweck, niemals nur als Mittel brauchest!" (Act in such a way that you handle each human being, be it yourself or any other, as an end in itself; never use a human person merely as a means.) Kant's formulation centers ethics on a profound respect for the inviolable dignity of the human person.

It was pointed out to Kant during his lifetime that his statement looks very much like a statement to be found in the gospel of Matthew, 7:12, "Alles, was ihr also von anderen erwartet, das tut auch ihnen! Darin besteht das Gesetz und die Propheten." (In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.) The major difference is that the gospel statement is issued as a command derived from religious law and traditions whereas Kant's statement, which has its source in pure human

reason, is developed through a complex series of philosophical arguments. (a very important distinction to an enlightenment philosopher!) There is a very similar folk saying in German (derived originally, no doubt, from the Bible), "Was du nicht willst, das man dir tu, das füg auch keinem andern zu." (Whatever you don't want others to do to you, don't do to others.)

Kant also formulated his categorical imperative in the terms, "Handle nur nach derjenigen Maxime, durch die du zugleich wollen kannst, daß sie ein allgemeines Gesetz werde." (Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.) This variation of the imperative is a way of testing one's individual reasons for action, to see whether one's reason and action in combination meet the standard of morality, even if it may be advantageous on other grounds.

In his ethics Kant had derived the categorical imperative from the nature of reason itself, rather than from observations of human experience. That basis for the categorical imperative is, in the language of Kant, an *a priori* basis, that is, based on a capacity and an inborn rational nature common to every human being. It is from the fact that the basic reasoning capacity of all people is common to all that Immanuel Kant was confident that the system of morality he derived from it would have valid application to the life of all people.

Immanuel Kant was a professor at the University of Königsberg. At that time Königsberg was on the eastern border of Prussia. After World War II Prussia ceased to be a German state. Königsberg now lies in a Russian province and has been renamed Kaliningrad. (For more background on the life of Immanuel Kant, see the *Kulturecke* of August 1999.)

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