

Script for Sophya Bytes – The Categorical Imperative

Copyright 2021 by Lisa M. Smith

This is Sophya Bytes with Professor X, where I'll be breaking down a mind-bending philosophy in 10 minutes or less!

Let's get it started with Immanuel Kant's The Categorical Imperative.

(Title: You CAN'T understand KANT)

Overall, Immanuel Kant's The Categorical Imperative is a decision-making process that relies heavily on a person having a strong moral center. He emphasizes that you're always in control of your actions regardless of any external factors. So there's no such thing as "the devil made me do it" in Kant's world because we all have that thing called will...

The definition of will is the mental faculty by which one deliberately chooses or decides a course of action. Some don't believe we have free will because of societal restraints, but I do. We have laws in place to control our most base or evil desires, but in reality we can do whatever we want, we just need to be willing to accept the consequences! Prisons are full of people who were rightly found guilty of exercising their free will against the law.

Our will shapes what Kant calls MAXIMS, which are subjective rules or policies that state what you're doing and why. Here's the thing about maxims: 1. We might not know what our maxims are; 2. We might not act consistently with our maxims, and 3. Our maxims may not be consistent with one another.

For example, I like coffee every morning because it jump starts my day and normally I'll drink Dunkin' Donuts coffee. But sometimes I'll skip a day or I may be in the mood for bougie coffee.

These maxims or rules that reflect what we're doing and why influence our principles, or what Kant calls IMPERATIVES. Imperatives prescribe HOW one should act in any given situation.

There are two different types of imperatives: HYPOTHETICAL and CATEGORICAL.

A hypothetical imperative, a non-moral imperative, dictates how a person should act in a certain way only if they are choosing to satisfy a desire.

There are two different types: assertoric and problematic, and both are based on how we want things to play out.

If we're looking for a particular end that may or may not happen, then it's problematic because the end is uncertain and what we desire is not rooted in any reasoning.

On the other hand, if we're looking for a particular end that comes from our human nature, like seeking happiness, then it's assertoric because we'll always desire happiness, but there's no general agreement on what constitutes happiness; it differs from person to person and again, isn't rooted in reasoning.

All actions that come under the categorical imperative, however, are based on MORAL LAW, should be MORALLY WORTHY, and require HUMAN REASONING. Imperatives under this type are ones that everyone can agree on as right and fair, like giving up your seat to an elderly woman, and repeated actions under this imperative eventually become accepted as moral law.

(Title: Free or Not Free, that is the question)

Now, Kant outlines what constitutes free will and again, that freedom is based on our moral center.

If your actions reflect HYPOTHETICAL IMPERATIVES, which are driven by your desires, then according to Kant YOU ARE NOT FREE because you're allowing your desires to control your actions.

If, however, your actions reflect CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVES, which are driven by human reasoning and moral law, then YOU ARE FREE because you're CHOOSING to follow moral law. Every action that reflects the categorical imperative ABSOLVES YOU FROM THE CONSEQUENCES.

Didja you get that? If you do something that's morally right, but the outcome may produce a negative result, like a person's death as an extreme example, it's not your fault because you were doing the right thing.

Ok, so how do you know whether an action is HYPOTHETICAL or CATEGORICAL? Well, can EVERYONE act based on your principles?

If everyone CAN'T act on them, then you shouldn't do them because it's not an action that everyone can agree is the right action.

If everyone CAN act on your rules, then you SHOULD do them because your actions reflect moral law, that universal understanding of right and wrong.

Yes, this approach is way too black and white with no 50 shades of gray, but according to Kant, you can hold your head up high through that court conviction if your actions reflect categorical imperatives.

The more we act on CATEGORICAL imperatives, the stronger our will. The more we act on HYPOTHETICAL imperatives, the weaker our will.

So to recap: we all possess will, and our will shapes the subjective rules that state what we're doing and why, called maxims. These maxims, in turn, influence our principles, called imperatives.

If we act on categorical imperatives, we're good because our actions reflect moral law and this strengthens the will.

If we act on hypothetical imperatives, problems will develop because our actions reflect desires that aren't anchored in human reasoning, and constantly acting on desires weakens the will.

And THAT is Immanuel Kant's The Categorical Imperative in 10 minutes or less!