

IS MORALITY A SYSTEM OF HYPOTHETICAL IMPERATIVES?

By ROBERT L. HOLMES

IT takes courage to go after cherished philosophical orthodoxies; often as not upon opening one's game bag to display the dragon's head one finds a possum instead. A live one at that.

So it is with keen interest that we inspect the trophy from Philippa Foot's attempt to bag the Categorical Imperative.¹ Not that Kant's doctrine enjoys the status of an orthodoxy; in fact it probably has few unqualified defenders. What is challenging in Mrs. Foot's discussion is not so much the denial that moral judgments are categorical imperatives as the contention that they have 'no *better* claim to be categorical imperatives than do statements about matters of etiquette' (p. 312, italics added). For this might suggest that it is of no greater consequence whether one acts justly than whether he minds his manners, or whether he causes unnecessary suffering than whether he eats with his fingers; which if true *would* overturn our most deeply-rooted conceptions about morality by reducing it to the status of a possibly useful but, like etiquette, largely adventitious embroidery to human intercourse.

As it is certain that this is not what Mrs. Foot intends, let us examine her thesis that moral judgments are hypothetical imperatives; not so much with a view to contesting it as with a view to understanding what it means.

Acknowledging that 'we find in our language two different uses of words such as "should" and "ought", apparently corresponding to Kant's hypothetical and categorical imperatives, and [that] we find moral judgments on the "categorical" side', she contends that this sense of 'categorical' [presupposing no connection with the agent's desires or interests (p. 307)] does not suffice to distinguish moral judgments from judgments of etiquette. For

. . . we find this non-hypothetical use of "should" in sentences enunciating rules of etiquette, as, for example, that an invitation in the third person should be answered in the third person, where the rule does not *fail to apply* to someone who has his own good reasons for ignoring this piece of nonsense, or who simply does not care about what, from the point of view of etiquette, he should do. Similarly, there is a non-hypothetical use of "should" in contexts where something like a club rule is in question. The club secretary who has told a member that he should not bring ladies into the smoking room does not say, "Sorry, I was

¹ 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives', *Philosophical Review*, LXXXI (1972), 306-16. An earlier version was published in *Philosophical Exchange* (Summer, 1971) by the Center For Philosophical Exchange, Brockport, N.Y. Page references will be to the former.

mistaken” when informed that this member is resigning tomorrow and cares nothing about his reputation in the club. (Pp. 308f.)

She then concludes:

It follows that if a hypothetical use of “should” gives a hypothetical imperative, and a non-hypothetical use of “should” a categorical imperative, then “should” statements based on rules of etiquette, or rules of a club, are categorical imperatives. Since this would not be accepted by defenders of the categorical imperative in ethics, who would insist that these other “should” statements give hypothetical imperatives, they must be using this expression in some other sense. We must therefore ask what they mean when they say that “You should answer . . . in the third person” is a hypothetical imperative. (P. 309.)

The remainder of the discussion consists of entertaining and rejecting various attempts to answer this question.

But notice that this leaves us with an unexplicated sense of ‘hypothetical’ in the claim that morality is a system of hypothetical imperatives. For if on the distinction instrumental to the above argument it turns out that moral judgments are categorical—even if, on Mrs. Foot’s view, inconsequentially so—then in the presumably significant claim that morality is a system of hypothetical imperatives a *different* sense of the distinction must be operating. What might that be?

The apparently intended answer emerges in the following passage:

Very roughly the idea [behind insisting that etiquette consists of merely hypothetical imperatives, morality of categorical imperatives] seems to be that one may reasonably ask why anyone should bother about what should, (should from the point of view of etiquette) be done, and that such considerations deserve no notice unless reason is shown Considerations of etiquette do not have any automatic reason-giving force, and a man might be right if he denied that he had reason to do “what’s done”. This seems to take us to the heart of the matter, for, by contrast, it is supposed that moral considerations necessarily give reasons for acting to any man. (P. 309.)

This suggests that if moral judgments are categorical imperatives, they have something called ‘automatic reason-giving force’, whereas if they are merely hypothetical they do not. And if they do not, then just as in etiquette a man might be right if he denied that he had reason to do “what’s done”, so in morality he might be right if he denied that he had reason to do what is moral.²

² I take this to mean that a person might concede that a given course is the morally required one and still rightly deny that he has reason to take it, an interpretation reinforced by Mrs. Foot’s further observation that ‘people may indeed follow either morality or etiquette without asking why they should do so, but equally well they may not. They may ask for reasons and may reasonably refuse to follow either if reasons are not to be found’ (p. 312). Notice, incidentally, that this conflates the question of whether moral judgments are categorical imperatives with the altogether different question of why (or whether) one should be moral; one can ask and try to answer the latter *whatever* one’s answer to the former.

This claim, however, lends itself to a variety of interpretations. It might be taken in a strong sense, as denying that the acknowledgment that x is the moral thing to do gives one *any* reason to do x , or in a weak sense, as denying that such acknowledgment gives one a sufficient reason to do x . As the stronger claim entails the weaker one, to establish the falsity of the weaker one would suffice to falsify the stronger one. So let us concentrate upon the weaker claim. But even in this sense the claim is ambiguous, and may be taken to deny that in conceding that x is what one morally ought to do one acquires a sufficient *motivating* reason for doing x , or to deny that in these circumstances one has a sufficient *justifying* reason for doing x ; and if the latter, to deny that one has a sufficient justifying reason from any one of a number of points of view (e.g., prudence, morality, etiquette, etc.). To speak of “reasons for action” *simpliciter*, in other words, obscures the distinction between asking for a reason to support the judgment *that* one should do x and asking for a reason why one should *do* x given that it is what one should do. The former is to ask for a justification of a moral judgment, the latter for a reason to do what one morally ought to do, or more generally, for a reason for being moral.

If to deny that morality provides a sufficient motivating reason for acting is to deny that people are moved to do the moral thing by the mere knowledge that it is moral, then while this claim is undoubtedly correct (Plato to the contrary notwithstanding), it has little to do with Kant’s doctrine of categorical imperatives. For whatever its exact analysis, that doctrine is a theory about the *status* of moral judgments and not a theory about the connection between obligation and motivation. Kant, in fact would have agreed with this claim; indeed it is essential to his moral theory.³ Where so much of Greek philosophy conceives the central problem confronting the moral agent to be to determine what one ought to do—on the assumption that once this is known any rational man will just naturally do it—Kant, in the manner of Christian ethicists, conceives it to be one of getting oneself to do what one knows one ought. And this can be a problem only for beings who are less than automatically responsive to moral considerations.

It seems, therefore, that we must look to the second interpretation, according to which to deny that morality embodies sufficient justifying reasons is to say that one might concede that x is what he morally ought to do and still quite rationally, and sometimes, at least, rightly, deny that he has sufficient justification for following that course. But while this claim is correct on some interpretations it is false on others. If the claim is simply that one may acknowledge a moral obligation but still reasonably

³ Kant’s conception of reverence for the moral law would at most conflict with the weaker interpretation of this thesis by entailing that awareness of the moral law generates *some* reason (motivationally) to honour it.

wonder whether the action in question is justified from some other point of view, then the claim is manifestly correct; one may seriously question whether moral conduct is justified, say, from the point of view of law, self-interest, or national interest. Kant never denied this and certainly never made its denial any part of what he meant by categorical imperatives. If *this* is what Mrs. Foot means by saying that one can demand reasons for following morality in the same way that he can demand reasons for following etiquette, then while her contention is an unassailable one, it is hard to see how one extracts from it the seemingly momentous conclusion that morality is a system of hypothetical imperatives.

On the other hand, if the claim is that a person can both concede that x is what he morally ought to do and still rightly deny that he has a morally sufficient reason for doing that thing, then the claim is clearly false. To acknowledge that x is what one morally ought to do, all things considered, is to acknowledge that one has a morally sufficient justification for doing x ; to deny this would be to betray a failure to have understood what was initially conceded. And surely if to be 'automatically reason-giving' means anything, it means that a person who makes such an acknowledgment needs no further moral reason for performing the act in question; so that if this property were regarded as making judgments categorical, then moral judgments would indeed be categorical.⁴

There is, however, an altogether different construction which Mrs. Foot may be placing upon the notion of a 'reason for action'. It is suggested by the following passage:

It will be said that this way of viewing moral considerations must be totally destructive of morality, because no one could ever act morally unless he accepted such considerations as in themselves sufficient reason for action. Actions that are truly moral must be done "for their own sake," "because they are right," and not for some ulterior purpose. This argument we must examine with care, for the doctrine of the categorical imperative has owed much to its persuasion. (P. 312.)

It would appear now that the notion of a 'sufficient reason for action' is being somehow identified with, or perhaps taken to follow from, the thesis that an action is "truly moral" only if done because it is right, and a moral agent "truly moral" only if he acts from that motive.

Kant, of course, is at his most vulnerable on this point, and Mrs. Foot's critique of this thesis is convincing. But when Kant distinguishes acting *in accordance* with duty from acting *from duty* he is expressly recognizing the distinction between merely doing (for whatever reason)

⁴ Not that this would suffice to explain what Kant meant by categorical imperatives, since in this sense many other sorts of judgments would be categorical also; if someone acknowledges that x is what he should do from the point of view of etiquette, then he cannot consistently deny that he needs no further justification from that point of view either.

what is prescribed by morality and doing it because it is prescribed by morality. Rather than this distinction marking the distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives, it presupposes that distinction, since what is done in each case (from duty and in accordance with duty) is what is categorically prescribed. If doing what is right because it is right were what made moral judgments categorical (and if failure to act from that motive rendered them hypothetical) then categoricalness would be a person-relative property which moral judgments would sometimes have and sometimes not, a characterization totally alien to Kant's. The question of the proper criteria for making judgments of moral worth is an important one, and one on which Mrs. Foot's account rings truer than Kant's; but the resolution of that issue one way or the other does not affect the question of the nature and status of moral judgments.

But perhaps we have been on the wrong track altogether. Perhaps Mrs. Foot's philosophical game bag is *supposed* to be empty, and the whole point is that the very notion of a categorical imperative is meaningless, the very conception illusory. If that were the case, it would be unfair to argue that the senses which Mrs. Foot does produce as possible candidates are implausible; after all, it is the defender of categorical imperatives who bears the burden of specifying what that notion means. But if this is her position, then the proper conclusion should be, not that moral judgments are hypothetical imperatives, but that the whole distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives (other than in the allegedly inconsequential sense introduced earlier) does not apply to morality. For if there is no philosophically interesting sense in which moral judgments might conceivably be categorical, then there is no philosophically interesting sense in which they are merely hypothetical; in which case we are again at a loss to know what to make of the claim that morality is a system of hypothetical imperatives.

Without discounting the value of Mrs. Foot's characteristically insightful discussion, I think we must therefore conclude that whether there is a meaningful distinction to be made between categorical and hypothetical imperatives, and, if there is, whether moral judgments have some significant claim to be the former, are still open questions.

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