

MORALITY AS A SYSTEM OF HYPOTHETICAL IMPERATIVES

Philippa Foot



THE COMMONSENSE VIEW

“It is generally supposed, even by those who would not dream of calling themselves his followers, that **Kant established one thing beyond doubt**—namely, the necessity of distinguishing moral judgments from hypothetical imperatives. That **moral judgments cannot be hypothetical imperatives** has come to seem an unquestionable truth.” (Foot 1972, 305)



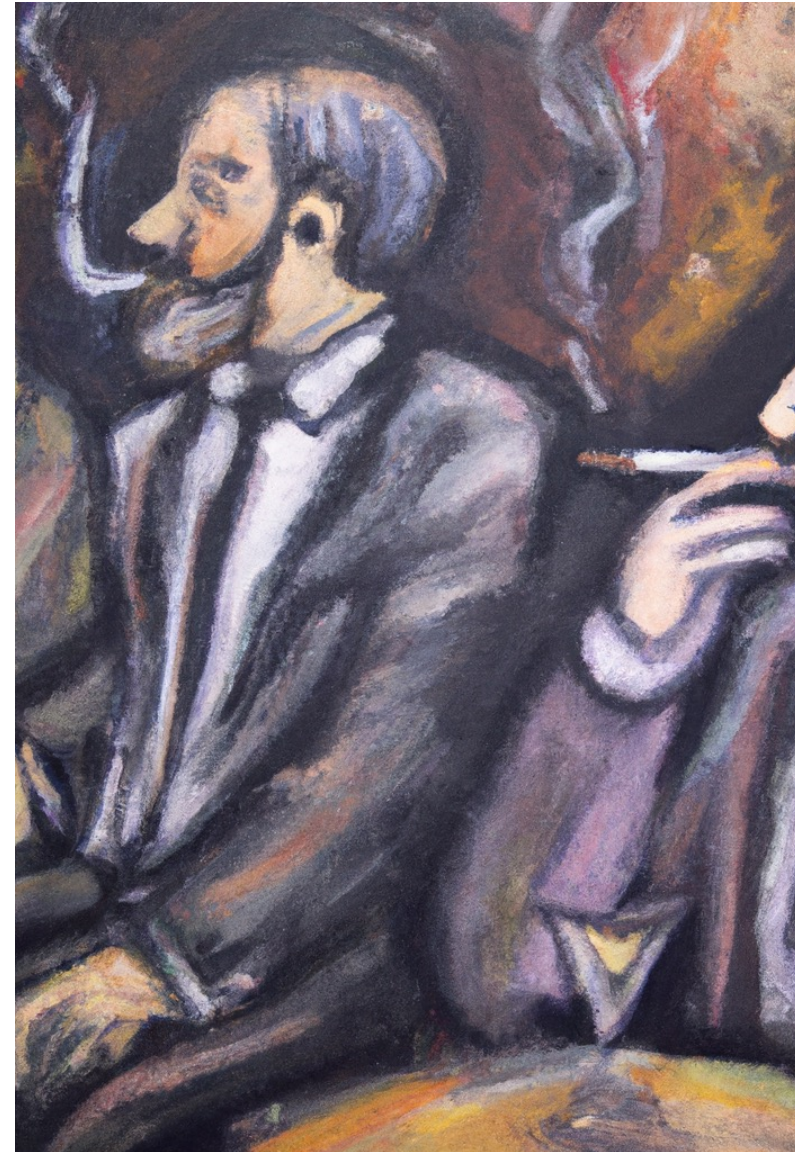
RULES OF ETIQUETTE

Foot says, “we find ‘should’ used **non-hypothetically** in some **non-moral** statements.” (308)

Example:

The club secretary says: “**You should not bring ladies into the smoking room.**”

Upon finding out the rule violator will resign tomorrow and cares nothing about his reputation at the club, the secretary will not say: “Sorry, I was mistaken.”



ETIQUETTE VS. MORALITY

According to Foot, the difference is. . .

“although people give as their reason for doing something the fact that it is required by etiquette, we do not take this consideration as **in itself giving us reason to act**.

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" [i.e. follow rules of etiquette].”

By contrast,

“it is supposed that **moral considerations necessarily give reasons** for acting to any person.”



TWO SENSES OF 'CATEGORICAL'

Inescapable

A rule/norm is inescapable iff it applies to you, regardless of your aims or desires.

Strongly Categorical

A rule/norm is strongly categorical iff it gives you a reason to ϕ , no matter what your aims or desires.



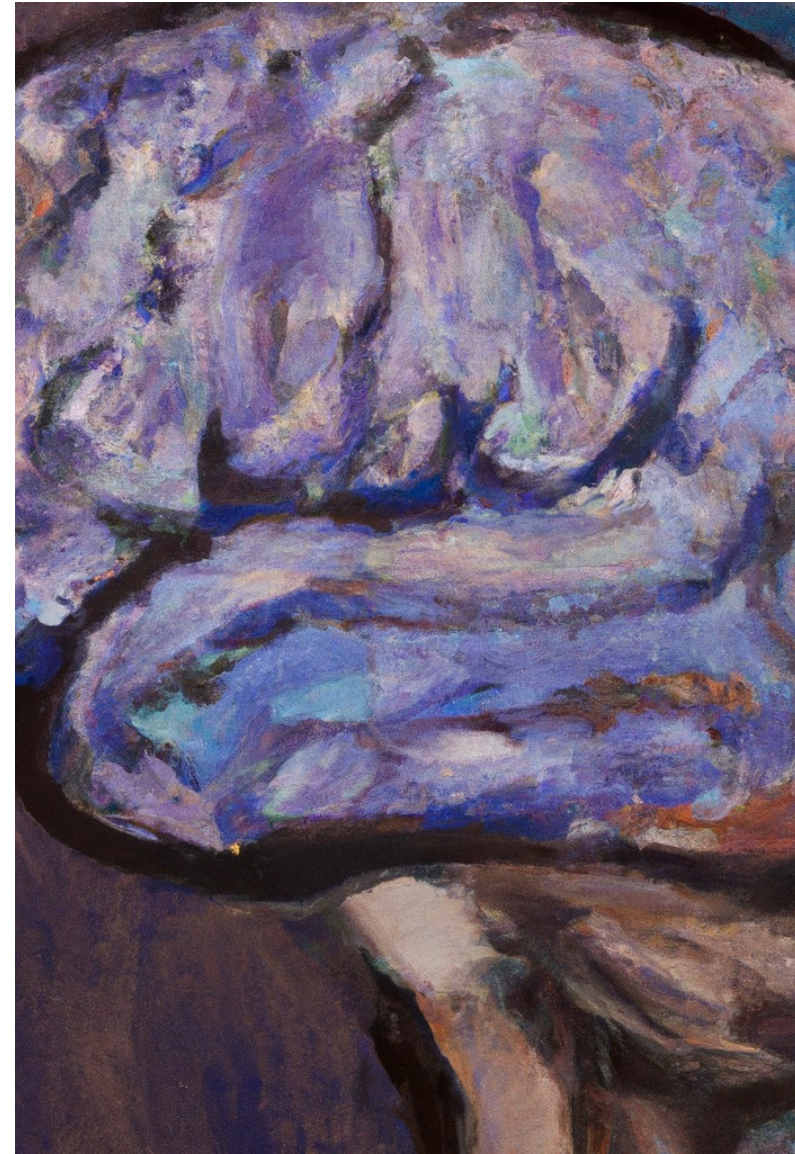
MORALITY AND RATIONALITY — REVISITED

What makes moral “shoulds” different from etiquette?

- Kant: some type of **irrationality** is involved in ignoring the “should” of morality.

Philippa Foot disagrees:

- “The man who rejects morality because he sees no reason to obey its rules **can be convicted of villainy but not inconsistency.**
- Nor will his action necessarily be **irrational.**”



NORM ENFORCEMENT

Why do moral norms *feel* like they have “binding force”?

Philippa Foot says,

“There is nothing behind the idea that moral judgments are categorical imperatives but the relative stringency of our moral teaching.” (310)

Moral rules are simply enforced more strictly than rules of etiquette, club rules, etc.

Do you agree?

Is this all there is to morality?



FOOT'S CONCLUSION

“The conclusion we should draw is that moral judgments have no better claim to be categorical imperatives than do statements about matters of etiquette.”

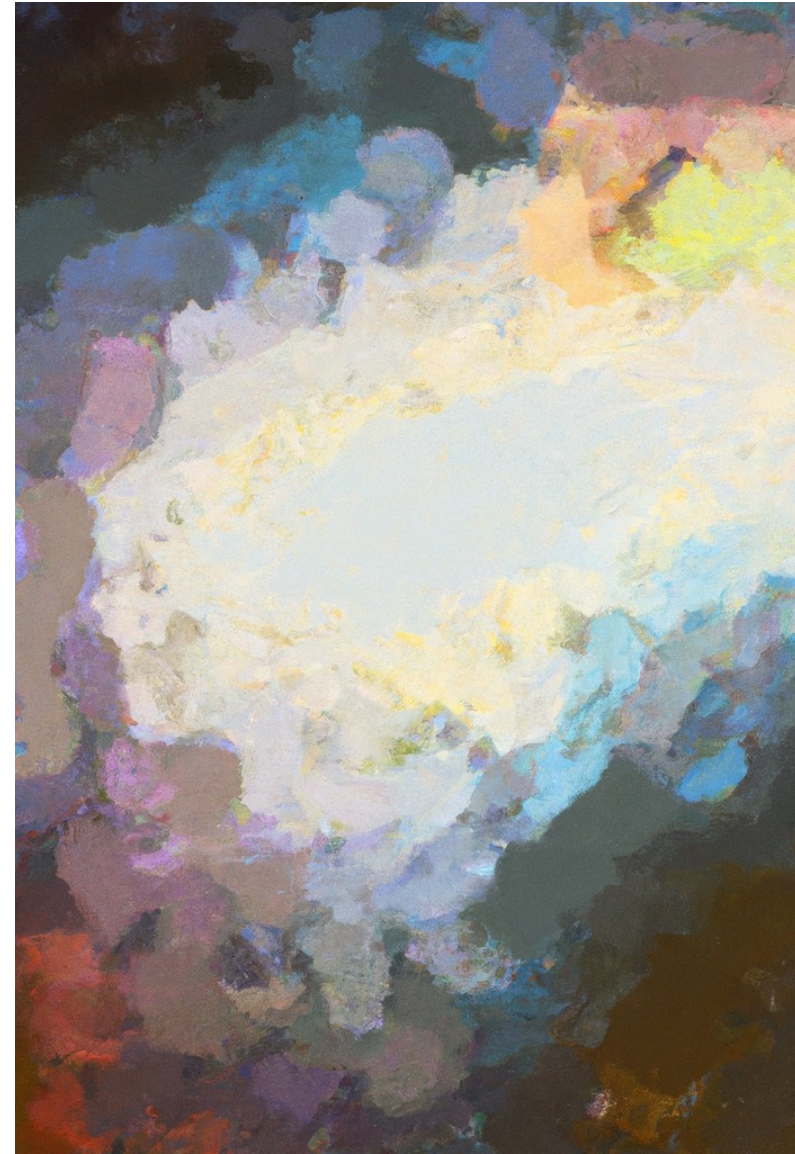
People may indeed follow either morality or etiquette without asking why they should do so, but equally well they may not. They may ask for reasons and may reasonably refuse to follow either if reasons are not to be found.” (312)



MORALITY WITHOUT STRONG CATEGORICITY

What is lost by claiming that moral norms are inescapable, but not strongly categorical?

- We cannot say that an agent has a reason to ϕ just because the moral norm applies to them.
- We must reject: **If S ought to ϕ , then S has a reason to ϕ .**



THE AMORALIST

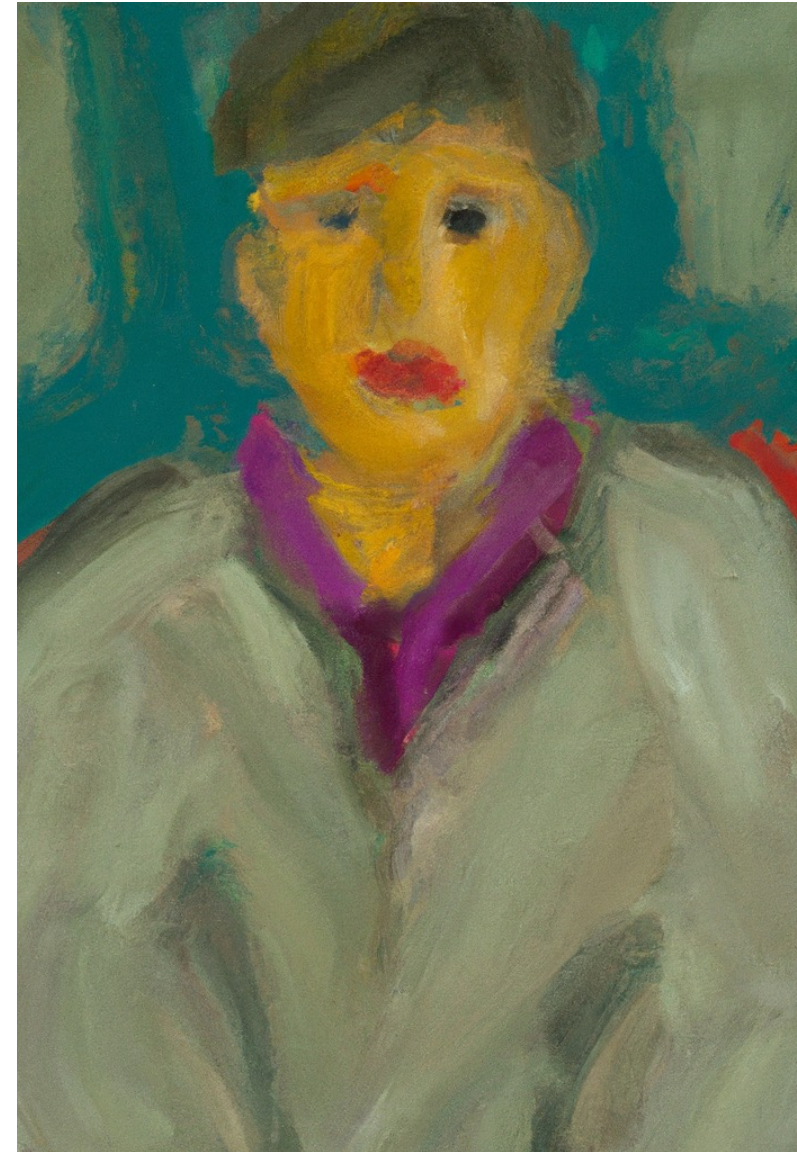
“We cannot criticize or blame people for failing to do what we believe they have no reason to do” (Parfit 2011, 442).

The Awful Person (Williams 1995)

- Imagine someone who is entirely indifferent to morality. He is so nasty that he doesn't care at all about acting morally. He is completely unmotivated to treat friends and family better, even following a thorough attempt to convince him otherwise.

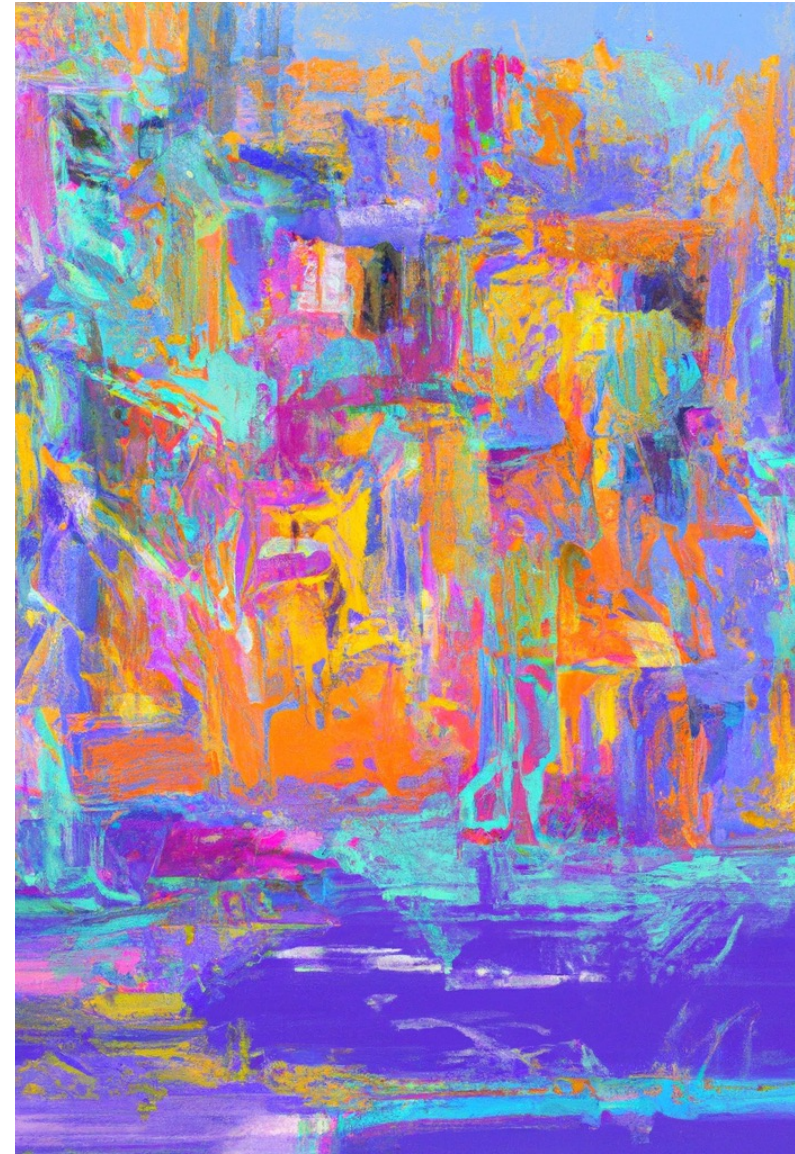
Are we willing to say he has no reason to be nicer?

- Foot says, Yes!



'OUGHTS' DON'T ENTAIL REASONS

1. Such cases are rare.
2. We can still criticize people who lack reasons.
3. It may be legitimate to say, "A ought not ϕ " and "A has a reason not to ϕ ."



IS THIS DESTRUCTIVE TO MORALITY?

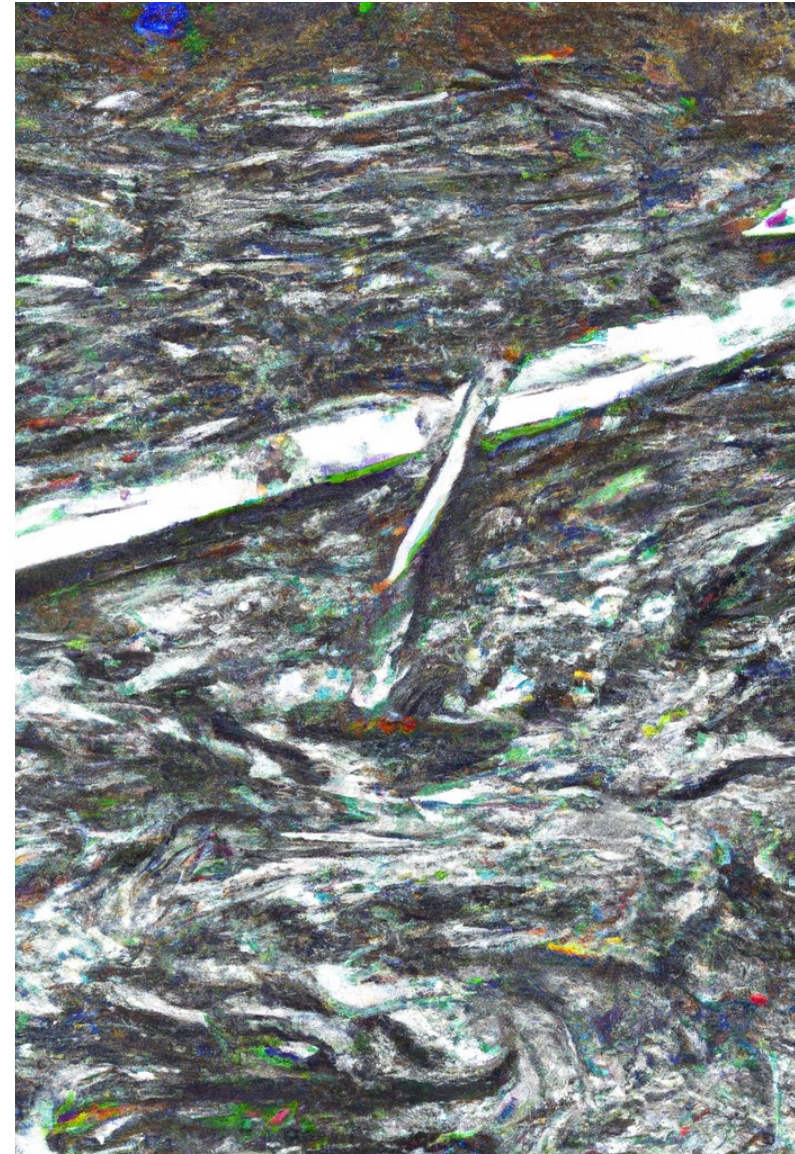
If morality is not categorical, are “moral” acts self-interested?

Kant thought so!

Examples:

- I help people because I desire praise from others.
- I tell the truth because it benefits me to be honest.

In these cases, I act honestly and charitably, but I lack the virtues of honesty and charity.



KANT'S PSYCHOLOGICAL HEDONISM/EGOISM

Kant thinks all hypothetical imperatives are self-interested.

Lectures on Ethics

- The principle of truth-telling under a system of hypothetical imperatives is: do not lie *if it harms one to lie*.

Metaphysics of Morals

- Ethics cannot start from ends which a person may proposed to himself, since these are all “selfish”.

Critique of Practical Reason

- When acting not out of respect for the moral law as such, we act out of “self love” or happiness.



A FINAL WORRY?

“I am sure that many people will be unconvinced and will argue that one element essential to moral virtue is still missing. This missing feature is the recognition of a duty to adopt those ends which we have attributed to the moral man. We have said that he does care about others, and about causes such as liberty and justice; that it is on this account that he will accept a system of morality. But what if he never cared about such things, or what if he ceased to care? Is it not the case that he ought to care?”

This is exactly what Kant would say.

Foot's reply,

“they are relying on an **illusion**, as if trying to give the moral "ought" a **magic** force.”

