**On the Singularity of the Categorical Imperative**

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**Abstract**

Kant famously claims that there is only a single supreme principle of morality: the Categorical Imperative. This claim is often treated with skepticism. After all, Kant proceeds to provide no fewer than six formulations of this purportedly single supreme principle—formulations which appear to differ significantly. But appearances can be deceptive. In this paper, I argue that Kant was right. There is only a single Categorical Imperative, and each of its formulations expresses the very same moral principle.

1. **Introduction**

In the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argues that the Categorical Imperative is “the supreme principle of morality” (4:392). This claim is subject to a well-known puzzle. On the one hand, Kant maintains that there is “only a single categorical imperative and it is this: *act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*” (4:421). On the other, Kant proceeds to provide no fewer than five reformulations of the Categorical Imperative, several of which appear to introduce new and important moral requirements. Moreover, although Kant repeatedly asserts that all of his formulas are equivalent, he spends very little time showing how this could be so. Accordingly, many of Kant’s interpreters reject his claim that there is “only a single” Categorical Imperative (see, e.g., von Platz 2016; Wood 2017; Korsgaard 1996, 133–59; Atwell 1969).

This paper takes a new look at the familiar debate over the Categorical Imperative’s purported singularity. I argue that there is indeed only a single Categorical Imperative, which finds its purest expression in Kant’s first formula—the Formula of Universal Law (“FUL”). First, I explain Kant’s puzzling remarks about the relationship among the Categorical Imperative’s formulas and argue that each formula serves to bring FUL closer to moral intuition, that is, to make its command easier to understand and obey. Second, I argue that all six of Kant’s formulations are substantively identical because they are expressions of the very same moral principle.

1. **Kant on the Formulations of the Categorical Imperative**

Kant provides six formulations of the Categorical Imperative. There are three standalone formulas, two of which are given a *typic* or a variation intended to explain their central idea. A sixth, “universal” formula is alternatively read as a rephrasing of FUL or a formula in its own right (Allison 2011, 251–55). These are Kant’s formulations:

1. Formula of Universal Law (“FUL”): Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law (G 4:421).
2. Formula of the Law of Nature (“FLN”) (FUL’s *typic*): So act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature.
3. Formula of Humanity (“FH”): So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means (G: 4:429).
4. Formula of Autonomy (“FA”): The idea of the will of every rational being as a will giving universal law (G 4:431).
5. Formula of the Realm of Ends (“FRE”) (FA’s *typic*): Every rational being must act as if he were by his maxims at all times a lawgiving member of the universal realm of ends (G 4:438).
6. Universal Formula (“UF”): Act according to that maxim which can at the same time make itself into a universal law (G 4:436).

Interpreters generally recognize four ways in which these formulas could be related (see Allison 2011, 245–60; von Platz 2016). According to the *strong* or *intensional equivalence* view, the formulas represent the very same moral principle, and, when correctly applied, yield the same results for the same reasons (O’Neill 1989, 131). According to the *weak* or *extensional equivalence* view, the formulas yield the same results but not always for the same reasons (Allison 2011, 245–60; Guyer 2007, chap. 5). According to what we might call a *system view*, the formulas together form a *system* of principles, each with its own role (Wood 2017). Finally, according to a *non-equivalence view*, the formulas represent different moral principles with different results.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Besides his repeated claims that there could be only a single categorical imperative (e.g. G 4:421, 4:436, VE 27:266), Kant has the following to say about the relationship of his formulas:

The above three ways of representing the principle of morality are at bottom only so many formulae of the very same law, and any one of them of itself unites the other two in it. There is nevertheless a difference among them, which is indeed subjectively rather than objectively practical [*die zwar eher subjective- als objective-practisch ist*], intended namely to bring an idea of reason closer to intuition (by a certain analogy) and thereby to feeling (G 4:436).

Kant’s claim that the formulas are “at bottom only so many formulae of the very same law” suggests that he considered his formulas equivalent in the ‘strong’ sense. But it is followed up by the gnomic pronouncement that there is nevertheless “a difference among [the formulas],” which is “subjectively rather than objectively practical” (G 4:436). As becomes clearer in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, this distinction has to do with Kant’s account of moral motivation. Put simply, a maxim is objectively practical when it is necessitated (commanded) by the moral law; subjectively practical when we are *actually motivated to adopt it*.

In the *Second Critique*, Kant explains:

The doctrine of method is understood…as the way in which one can provide the laws of pure practical reason with *access* to the human mind and *influence* on its maxims, that is, the way in which one can make *objectively practical* reason *subjectively* practical as well (5:151).

Objectively practical laws are made subjectively practical, then, when we have access to them and they gain influence on our actual maxims. Hence, when Kant argues that “the most powerful incentive to the good” is “the pure representation of virtue” (KpV 5:152), he explains that “the only method there is for making the *objectively practical* laws of pure reason *subjectively practical* [is] merely through the pure representation of duty” (5:153). And when Kant later warns against moral principles grounded in moral feeling, he argues that:

if one…begins with pathological or pure aesthetic or even moral *feeling* (with what is subjectively rather than objectively practical)…then there will indeed be no *metaphysical first principles* of the doctrine of virtue, since feeling, whatever may arouse it, always belongs to the *order of nature* (MS 6:376-377).

Again, the subjectively practical is equated to moral feeling, the objectively practical with the commandments of pure practical reason.

With this understanding in mind, Kant’s *Groundwork* claims become significantly less mysterious. The formulas are identical in the objectively practical sense, so they express *the same commandment of pure practical reason*, that is to say, “the very same law” (G 4:436). They are not identical in the subjectively practical sense, so they have different functions with respect to our access to the moral law and the influence of that law on moral feeling. Put another way, they play different roles in moral motivation. And this is precisely what Kant also concludes: the formulas bring the categorical imperative “closer to intuition (by a certain analogy) and thereby to feeling” (4:436). In sum: Kant’s reformulations of the Categorical Imperative introduce analogies intended to bring its principle closer to intuition—to increase its influence on moral feeling. In this sense, they are not identical. They are, however, expressions of the same moral law.[[2]](#endnote-2) As I will now show, Kant’s formulas are indeed equivalent in this sense.

1. **In Defense of Strong Equivalence**

To see that Kant’s formulas are equivalent, it will help to run through them once more. FUL requires acting “according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.” As Kant notes, when rational agents act they necessarily act according to the representation of a law (G 4:412, 4:428, KpV 5:125). FUL requires that we act only according to the representation of *universalizable* laws. FUL therefore concerns only practical laws—laws governing *rational agents.* This is also clear from all of Kant’s examples. It is hard to see, for instance, how a law “that everyone, once he believes himself to be in need, could promise whatever he fancies with the intention not to keep it” (G 4:422) could govern anything *other* than rational agents. Hence FUL requires us to act only according to maxims which we could will to become universal laws governing rational agents (*cf*. 4:437).

Kant then explains that FUL could “also be expressed as” FLN (4:42118-20), using the concept of a law of nature. He immediately clarifies this move, explaining that as it is used in FLN, “nature” means simply “the existence of things in so far as it is determined according to universal laws” (G 4:421). We have already seen that the ‘things’ which we must imagine to be governed by the universal laws at issue could only be rational agents. Hence FLN adds nothing substantive to the requirements of FUL and provides the concept of the law of nature only to bring it closer to intuition. Since our experiences of universal laws are limited to the domain of nature, reference to laws of nature may reasonably be expected to help us understand the universal laws of FUL. Indeed, for perfectly rational agents the laws of rationality would function analogously to laws of nature, for a perfectly rational being would be immediately determined by such laws (G 4:412-4:413).

As Stephen Engstrom has pointed out, this understanding of FLN is supported by Kant’s later discussions of laws of nature (Engstrom 2009, 161). In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant repeats his understanding of “nature” as “the existence of things under laws” (KpV 5:43). Rational agents can be understood as existing under two different sets of laws: laws “of a *supersensible* nature,” which is to say, “laws of freedom,” and laws of “*sensible nature*,” that is, “empirically conditioned laws” (5:43). Accordingly, laws of freedom—practical laws—*are* laws of nature in the very broad sense Kant alludes to in the *Groundwork*. Moreover, Kant explains that laws of sensible nature can serve as the typic of laws of freedom, just as sensible nature itself can be “the type of an intelligible nature” (5:70). That is because insofar as the “form of lawfulness in general” is concerned, “laws as such are the same, no matter from what they derive their determining grounds” (5:70). Hence, FLN’s reference to laws of nature simply helps us understand the form of lawfulness at issue in FUL; neither formula could be used to evaluate anything other than a practical law. As Engstrom puts it, FLN is best read as requiring us to act on universalizable laws “of our *rational* nature” (Engstrom 2009, 161).

Kant’s own applications of FUL and FLN in the *Groundwork* further confirm this view, for he treats “universal law” [*allgemeines Gesetz*] and “universal law of nature” [*allgemeines Naturgesetz*] as interchangeable. For instance, the aspiring lying-promiser asks “how things would stand if my maxim became a universal law” but concludes that his maxim “could never hold as a universal law of nature” (G 4:422, *cf.* VE 29:608). There is therefore every reason to conclude that FUL and FLN concern the same laws and are substantively equivalent.

FH introduces a lot of new terminology. Clarifying that new terminology with Kant’s own definitions will help reveal that no substantive requirements have been added to what was already contained in FUL and FLN, and that none have been removed. FH requires that we use “humanity” in ourselves and others always “as an end in itself” and never merely as a means. Kant emphasizes that he is using “humanity” [*Menschheit*] merely as shorthand for “rational nature” [*die vernünftige Natur*] (see, e.g., G 4:429, 4:430, 4:431, *cf.* 4:438).[[3]](#endnote-3) Furthermore, to treat something “as an end in itself” is to make it “the foundation of all maxims of actions” that is, to treat it “as the supreme limiting condition in the use of all means” (G 4:438). When we substitute the new terminology in FH with Kant’s own definitions, then, we see that FH is equivalent to:

FH\*: Always treat *rational nature* (in yourself and others) as *the foundation of all maxims of actions.*

FH\* already closely resembles FUL and FLN. And it can be further clarified. After all, Kant argues that rational nature consists in the capacity “to act *according to the representation of laws*, that is, according to principles” (e.g. G 4:412, 4:427, *cf.* KpV 5:32). Thus, FH’s requirement to treat *rational nature* as the supreme limiting condition on our maxims in fact requires us to treat *the capacity to act according to the representation of laws* (in ourselves and others) as supreme limiting condition—to make that capacity “the foundation of all maxims of actions” (4:438). To treat the capacity to act according to the representation of laws, in ourselves and in others, as the foundation of all our maxims, is, it seems to me, to act only according to those maxims which could serve to *govern* that capacity, both in ourselves and in others. In other words, it is to act only according to those maxims which could serve as a law of our rational nature (see also Engstrom 2009, 167–75).

FH brings the Categorical Imperative closer to intuition by highlighting its requirement that we treat rational agents as “ends in themselves,” and by making use of the intuitive characterization of wrongdoing as treating such agents “as mere means.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Those concepts serve to clarify the moral requirements imposed by the Categorical Imperative.[[5]](#endnote-5) Nevertheless, FH ultimately expresses the same principle as FUL and FLN. This is also what Kant concludes after reviewing his formulations: “the principle: act with reference to every rational being (to yourself and others) so that in your maxim it holds at the same time as an end in itself, is at bottom the same as the basic principle: act on a maxim that at the same time contains in itself its own universal validity for every rational being” (G 4:437).

If this argument is accepted, the equivalence of FA and FRE to the other formulas becomes readily apparent. FA asks us to see ourselves as a “will giving universal law,” (4:431) FRE as legislating *for all rational beings* (4:438). Both requirements are explicit in Kant’s famous explanation of the contradiction tests implicit in FUL/FLN:

One must *be able to will* that a maxim of our action become a universal law: this is as such the canon of judging it morally. Some actions are such that their maxim cannot even be *thought* without contradiction as a universal law of nature; let alone that one could *will* that it *should* become such. In the case of others that inner impossibility is indeed not to be found, but it is still impossible to *will* that their maxim be elevated to the universality of a law of nature, because such a will would contradict itself. (G 4:424).

Hence, to determine whether a maxim meets FUL’s requirements we must see whether it could be thought as, and rationally willed to be, a universal law, which I have argued is to be understood as a law governing all rational agents. Put another way, we must imagine ourselves legislating universal laws for all rational beings—and act only on maxims that could serve as such laws. FRE brings out and makes explicit this aspect of FUL. Once again, we are asked to act only on those maxims which could serve as universal laws governing rational nature (FUL/FLN), that is, maxims which could govern the capacity to act according to the representation of laws both in ourselves and others (FH).

Finally, UF requires that we act only according to that maxim which can “make itself into a universal law” (4:436). The only relevant textual difference between UF and FUL is that UF refers to maxims that could *make themselves into* universal laws (4:436), whereas FUL refers to maxims that could be *conceived and willed as* universal laws (4:421-424). According to Wood, this difference is of critical importance. The Universal Formula, he argues, is a restatement of FA, because UF, FRE and FA “do not refer to testing maxims for their permissibility by the criterion of what *can be consistently willed* as universal law, but instead command us positively to act on maxims that *can hold or be valid* as universal laws, which means…that they can belong to a total *system* of universal legislation” (Wood 1999, 189).

This view, which is also adopted by Allison (2011, 256), relies on the assumption that there are maxims which we could rationally will to be a universal law, but which could not hold as such a law. According to Wood and Allison, this is the case because FUL only tests maxims for consistency with *their own* universal form (Allison 2011, 256; Wood 1999, 189). If this were true then FUL would indeed be distinct from—and weaker than—FA, FRE and UF. It is not, however, true. Kant himself uses FUL/FLN to reject maxims of non-beneficence and self-neglect, neither of which are inconsistent with their own universal forms. As Allison recognizes, the problem with maxims of non-beneficence and self-neglect arises only because their counterpart universal laws would conflict with *other* ends that we, *qua* rational agents, must necessarily adopt (2011, 189–90).[[6]](#endnote-6) In any event, FUL simply does not say that we ought to consider maxims in isolation. It says instead that we may act only on those maxims which we could will to be universal laws. And maxims that could be rationally willed as a universal law governing all rational agents could also hold as such a law.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Accordingly, Kant’s formulas indeed express “a single Categorical Imperative” (G 4:421). FUL presents it in its purest form, as derived directly from the “mere concept of a categorical imperative” (G 4:420). Subsequent formulas illustrate a particular aspect of the Categorical Imperative to bring it closer to intuition. As Kant explains, FLN emphasizes its requirements for the *form* of our maxims, FH its consequences for the *ends* we may adopt, FA the element of *self-*legislation, and FRE the requirement that our maxims harmonize with one another (are internally consistent) and have a place within the legislative scheme of a hypothetical realm of ends (G 4:437). Nevertheless, these formulas differ only in their effect on moral motivation. Just as Kant claims, they are all expressions of the very same law.

1. **Conclusion**

Kant’s repeated claims that there is only a single Categorical Imperative are often treated with skepticism. In this paper I have argued that Kant is correct. There is only a single Categorical Imperative—and the Formula of Universal Law is it.

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1. There are many different ways of reaching this conclusion, not all of which are equally extreme. See, e.g., Atwell 1969, 273–84 (arguing that FUL and FH never conflict, but do not have the same breadth of application); Korsgaard 1996, 133–59 (arguing that FUL and FH reach different results because FH is more restrictive than FUL). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Note that this highlights an imprecision in the way interpreters often characterized the strong equivalence view. Allison and others assume that Kant’s formulas would be “identical” or “intensionally equivalent” so long as they represented the same principle and yield the same conclusions (Allison 2011, 255–56; von Platz 2016, 370). This is an overstatement, for the formulations could be *identical* only if they had *precisely the same meaning*. German, French, and English renderings of FUL would be identical in this sense, but Kant’s formulations evidently could not be. Strong equivalence is best understood as the view that all of Kant’s formulas *express* the very same moral principle. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Interpreters sometimes consider FH as if it expressed an obligation to treat *humans* or *persons* as ends in themselves. *See, e.g.,* Atwell 1969, 273. This mistake makes it easy to overlook FH’s ultimate similarity to FUL. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. As Hill among others notes, these concepts have been extremely effective in making Kant’s formulas more intuitive. *See* Hill 1980, 84–85. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. As several interpreters have shown, FH is especially helpful in clarifying the affirmative obligations that flow from the Categorical Imperative. *See, e.g.,* Wood 1999, 147–55; Hill 1980; Wood 2009*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Allison maintains that these derivations rely on FLN, which he takes to be meaningfully distinct from FUL. As I have already argued, we should reject that view. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Wood also argues that FA, FRE, and UF are distinct from FUL and FLN because the latter “do not tell us positively what kind of maxim we must act on” while the former “command us to positively to act on maxims that *can hold or be valid* as universal laws” (1999, 164, 189). This position is viable only if we accept the view that FUL/FLN cannot be used to derive any positive duties, while FA/FRE and UF can be so used. There is no space here to address the nature and possibility of derivations of positive duties from FUL/FLN. I argue elsewhere that FUL/FLN can indeed do so, but must put this dispute aside here (see Duindam 2023). Suffice to say here that it is clear *Kant* thought FUL could derive positive duties of virtue (see G 4:424, MS 6:395). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)