The Form of Hypothetical Imperatives

According to a widespread interpretative consensus, Kant's hypothetical imperatives are not really hypothetical at all. On this view, call it the *jurisdiction view,* all imperatives are categorical in form and differ only in whether they claim universal or local jurisdiction. While there are good textual and philosophical reasons for this view, in this paper, I will argue that the jurisdiction view is mistaken. In particular, I will argue that on a very natural reading of the *Groundwork's* presentation of imperatives, they are the verbal expression of a kind of practical inference and that inferences, like judgments, are hypothetical if they manifest a ground-consequence relation. I will close by comparing my understanding with the jurisdiction view on the vexed issue of the status of what is called *the* Hypothetical Imperative.

According to such commentators as Patzig (1965), Beck (1958), Ludwig (2006), and Allison (2011), hypothetical imperatives are not hypothetical in their content but in their modality. In other words, *hypothetically* is a way of commanding, rather than a property of the imperative commanded. According to this view, the hypothetical imperative 'Don't lie if you want to preserve your reputation' (G: 441)[1] and the categorical imperative 'Don't lie!' have the same imperatival content. Each of them directs the addressee categorically not to lie. The difference between the two is only that the first directs itself only to those agents who have a pre-existing desire to preserve their reputation and the latter directs its commands to all agents. The antecedent of a hypothetical imperative simply makes the class of people to whom it is directed explicit. It is like a law that prefaces its commands by specifying its jurisdiction (Schroeder 2012).

The jurisdiction view has at least two things going for it. As its advocates have noted, in the *Groundwork*, Kant explicitly introduces the distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives as a distinction between the *ways* that imperatives command (*GMS*: 414).[2] Before Kant has settled into his customary, adjectival usage of hypothetical and categorical imperatives, he talks about imperatives that command hypothetically and imperatives that command categorically. The second thing the jurisdiction view has going for it is that it avoids a deep

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[1] In Kant's actual example the hypothetical imperative is given in the first person and not as an imperative.
[2] For citations of other places where he talks this way see Ludwig 2006: 141. For the sole other *published* instance see *Verk*: 8: 416.

puzzle about how an imperative could even have hypothetical structure. In the theoretical case, a hypothetical judgment expresses a relation between two judgments. What is asserted in such a judgment is neither of the two related judgments but the relation between them. But in an imperative, there is no such asserted relation between the two propositions. It is true that the speaker of an imperative believes that there is a relationship between lying and losing one's reputation, but the imperative does not assert such a relationship since it does not assert anything at all. But it is equally clear, that the speaker does not command that a hypothetical judgment come about. She is not, for example, instructing the addressee to bring it about that there be a relationship between lying and losing one's reputation.

Although the jurisdiction view seems to expurgate Kant of all that is philosophically noxious, it does so only by understanding the hypothetical-categorical distinction so that it has nothing to do with how Kant uses this distinction elsewhere. [3] One of the purposes of this essay will be to vindicate Kant's usage by showing that hypothetical imperatives express the same ground-consequence relationship that is found in hypothetical judgments.

Kant introduce[4]s and defines the term 'imperative' in four different places (*GMS:* 413, *KpV:* 20, *MS:* 622, *Log:* 86). In each of these places, he directs our attention to the idea of practical necessitation—that practical laws are addressed to imperfectly rational agents who ought to obey but don't always do so. But what exactly do imperatives have to do with practical necessitation? In the *Groundwork* account, he distinguishes between an objective principle, a command of reason, and an imperative.

> The representation of an objective principle, insofar as it is necessitating for a will, is called a command (of reason), and the formula of the command is called an imperative." (GMS: 413)

I interpret this sentence as follows: An objective principle expresses a theoretical relationship. Once this relationship is represented practically (i.e. insofar as it is "necessitating for a *will*"), it

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becomes a command of reason, and a formulation or verbal expression of this command of reason is an imperative.[5]

Consider Kant's example: "I ought not to lie if I will to keep my reputation" (*GMS*: 441). The objective principle represents a theoretical relationship between lying and losing one's reputation. It expresses an empirical/sociological fact that people who lie lose their reputation. It might be expressed by the sentence "Lying ruins one's reputation."

Now Kant insists that this objective principle is different from a command of reason because the latter necessitates our wills.[6] I take this to mean that the mere fact that lying ruins one's reputation cannot be practically relevant until one wills a good reputation. The theoretical connection itself cannot move us. A command of reason, therefore, connects the theoretical fact with an act of willing. It is a command because this connection issues in a practical demand, viz. the willing of the means. In other words, a command of reason takes the objective principle, relates it to an act of will, and issues a command. On this view, a command of reason can be captured by a practical syllogism:

> Practical Syllogism (PS)
> (a) If I lie, my reputation will be ruined. [Objective (theoretical) Principle]
> (b) To not ruin my reputation. [An act of will]
>
> (therefore) --------
>
> (c) To not lie. [An act of will]

In PS, we see what it would mean for an objective principle to be represented as necessitating for a will. The first premise is the objective principle, the second premise is the act of will with which the objective principle is connected, the 'therefore' represents the command, and the conclusion is the act of will that is commanded. On my reading a command of reason is captured by the practical syllogism on the whole.

A command of reason, however, is not quite an imperative. An imperative Kant says is a *formula* of a command of reason. In later discussions, Kant drops this distinction. What used to

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[5] See, for example, Allison 2011: 155 and Schönecker and Wood 2004: 125.
[6] Ludwig thinks that the descriptive sentence "Who wants to play the piano, should practice" and the sentence "If you want to play the piano, you must practice" differ only in that the latter is in the second person. As will become clear in what follows, I believe that this is mistaken.

be a command of reason is simply called an imperative and no distinction is made between a command of reason and its formula.[7] But what does the distinction mean even if he came to deemphasize it?

As Allison (2011: 155) notes, Kant uses the word "formula' in a number of ways. I follow him in understanding its use here to be that of a "verbal formulation". So when Kant distinguishes between a command of reason and its formula, he is distinguishing between a command of reason and its verbal formulation. But why does Kant make this distinction and feel that it is important enough to enshrine in his technical vocabulary? To my knowledge, there are no existing explanations of this peculiar insistence. However, once we see that a command of reason expresses an entire syllogism, a natural explanation arises. It stems from the fact that syllogisms cannot easily be captured in sentences. A sentence is suited to capture a judgment, whereas a syllogism is supposed to capture inference relations between judgments.

It is useful here to compare this to the theoretical case where Kant explicitly distinguishes between judgments and inferences. A judgment is a representative unity. It is a holding together of two concepts such that they are making a claim about the world. As Kant puts it, "…the aim of the copula **is** [is]… to distinguish the objective unity of given representations from the subjective"(B142). An act of inference on the other hand is not a holding together of two concepts but "that function of thought whereby one judgment is derived from another" (Log: 120). An inference is not a judgment but an act of derivation between judgments. This is important because there are judgments that look very much like inferences. Imagine that p = *Liza lies* and q = *Liza ruins her reputation*. We could *infer q*, from *p* and *if p then q* by means of modus ponens. We could also *believe* the complex proposition z = *if p and if p then q, then q*. These are very close, but as Lewis Carroll's tortoise (1895) has taught us, beliefs of any sort just don't warrant the derivation of another belief without a syllogism which licenses this derivation. In other words, *z* is not the same thing as the act of inference in which a knower infers that *q* from her belief in *p* and her belief in *if p then q*

But this means that there is a certain delicacy required when talking about syllogisms. If we are not careful, the syllogism can be mistaken for a judgment that asserts a connection between judgments not a rule which licenses a derivation from one to judgment from another. In

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[7] *KpV:* 20, *MS*: 622, *Log*: 86.

talking of modus ponens, for example, it would be natural, if misleading, to express it as follows: "if p is true and if p then q is true, then q must be true also". But this phrase is ambiguous. Do we mean to be pointing toward the rule of inference or simply talking about a complex judgment? The latter is something that one could believe and which could itself appear as a premise within a syllogism The former, however, is not. A syllogism is something that we do and there are rules that license this activity (i.e. modus ponens). Verbal articulations of a syllogism look very much like a complex judgment. Calling attention to the fact that they are verbal formulations of inferences guards against this misunderstanding.

Commands of reason suffer the same ambiguity. A command of reason necessitates the willing of one practical proposition given the willing and believing of other propositions. Since the practical conclusion can be thought of as being derived from the two premises, a command of reason plays the same role as a syllogism. But, this suggests that there will be a certain delicacy when verbally expressing a command of reason. Consider again Kant's example: "I ought not to lie if I will to keep my reputation". This sentence has the form of a judgment. It looks like something that asks for our belief. But if the reading that I am proposing is correct, this appearance is misleading. By insisting that imperatives are verbal formulations of underlying commands of reason, Kant instructs us explicitly not to understand these formulations as practical or theoretical judgments but as imperfect attempts to express a command of reason.

If, as I have argued, every imperative points to a command of reason, Kant's division of imperatives into hypothetical and categorical ought to be applied to these syllogisms. The question becomes why are some commands of reason hypothetical and some commands categorical? Since a command of reason is a practical inference, a hypothetical command of reason has the form as PS:

Practical Syllogism (PS)

(d) If I lie, my reputation will be ruined.

(e) To not ruin my reputation.

(therefore) --------

(f) To not lie.

A categorical command of reason must have the following form:

Practical Syllogism (CS)

(therefore) --------

(g) To not lie.

Since CS is supposed to follow no matter what the agent wills or believes, it is a command of reason that follows from no premises.

So what is hypothetical about these inferences? In the *Logic*, Kant explains that there is a connection between inferences and judgments:

> All rules (judgments) contain objective unity of consciousness of the manifold of cognition…Now only three conditions of this unity may be thought, however, namely: as subject to the inherence of marks, or as ground of the dependence of one cognition on another, or, finally as combination of parts in a whole (logical division). Consequently there can only be just as many kinds of universal rules (propositiones majores), through which the consequential of one judgment from another is mediated. And on this is grounded the division of all inferences of reason into *categorical*, *hypothetical*, and *disjunctive*. (Log: 122)

Kant's point here is that, at root, judgments and inferences are both rules. One instructs us how to connect concepts with each other in order to have objective unity; the other instructs us how to derive one judgment from another. But if rules themselves have a certain kind of formal structure, then both judgments and inferences will share this form.[8] In particular, hypothetical inferences will have the form of ground and consequent (Log: 129), and categorical inferences will have the form of "inherence of marks" (Log: 121).

By calling an imperative hypothetical, Kant draws our attention to a similarity between practical inferences like PS and modus ponens. In both cases, the premises stand to the conclusion as ground to consequence. Not only are the conclusions of hypothetical imperatives

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[8] This is related to the famous clue" to the derivation of the categories. (A67/B92-A87/B109). There Kant argues that there Kant argues that the forms of logic are also the forms of judgment.

to be willed if the premises are to be willed, but the conclusions are such *because* the premises are such. In the theoretical domain, this says that the premises are the reason we should believe the conclusion. In the practical sphere, it says that the premises are what make the conclusion something that ought to be willed. Obviously a full discussion of the ground-consequence relation is not possible here, but I hope to have shown that such a discussion is vital to our understanding of hypothetical imperatives.

The view argued for here has been offered as a replacement for the jurisdiction view of imperatives that takes hypothetical imperatives to differ from categorical imperatives only in the class of people to whom the imperative is addressed. I would like to close by comparing the two views on the issue of the status of what Hill has called *the* Hypothetical Imperative which is the imperative that instructs us, in general, to take the means to our ends. Since Hill's classic article (1973) commentators have noticed that the Hypothetical Imperative seems to be categorical. Since all rational agents ought to take the means to their ends, the Hypothetical Imperative has universal jurisdiction and, according to the jurisdiction view, it would therefore be categorical. But this conclusion is peculiar. In the first place, it implies that individual hypothetical imperatives belong to a different class then the general imperative of which they seem to be instantiations. In the second place, the division between hypothetical and categorical imperatives is supposed to capture the distinction between prudential and moral reasoning, but surely the injunction to take the means to our ends is a prudential rather than a moral one.

Those who have noticed this peculiarity have responded in either of two ways. People like Korsgaard (1997) have welcomed this result. It shows that hypothetical and categorical reasoning are of a piece, and in particular, it shows that hypothetical reasoning has a secret categorical underpinning. Morality, they argue, is assumed even in our means-ends rationality. Others, however, have argued that the Hypothetical Imperative is not a normative principle at all. Failing to will the means to your ends is simply a sign that you never willed the end in the first place (Ludwig 2006). Neither of these extreme responses is necessary if the jurisdiction view is rejected.

If hypothetical imperatives are verbal formulations of inferences, then the Hypothetical Imperative can be understood as the rule of hypothetical inference. As a rule of inference, it is not itself an inference and so cannot, strictly speaking be either hypothetical or categorical.

Again an analogy to modus ponens is instructive. Suppose that we divide all inferences into those that follow from modus ponens and those that follow from some other rule. If we ask where in this classificatory scheme the rule of modus ponens itself fits in, then we are failing to recognize that rules of inference are not themselves inferences. Modus ponens fails to follow from modus ponens not because it follows from something else but because it is not an act of inference at all. So too, the Hypothetical Imperative fails to be a hypothetical imperative not because it is a categorical imperative, but because it is not an imperative at all. Perhaps this is why in the actual text, Kant never refers to it as an imperative and only ever as a "proposition" (*GMS*: 417).

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