

On the Kantian Distinction between Prudential and Moral Commands

Imagine yourself at home sitting down to watch your favorite TV show. It doesn't start for ten minutes, so you idly flip through the channels and stop on a news station. The news correspondent happens to be talking about the war in Iraq. You find her claims to be extremely irritating and cannot control your anger. You pick up the thing closest to you, a paperweight, and throw it at the TV. Your aim is better than you expected. You hit the TV screen dead center and break it. Now you are doubly angry. You are still heated about the newscaster's remarks but you are also angry with yourself. Why? You have done something that has prevented you from attaining a plan you set for yourself, namely watching your favorite TV program.

Most of us feel that in light of your aim to watch TV, you *should* not or *ought* not to have broken the TV. But what is the nature and force of this "ought"? When I enter the room, see what you have done, witness your anger—some of which is self-directed—and state "you ought not to have broken the TV," I seem to be chastising you. I am reprimanding you for having done something that frustrates the attainment of a goal I know you to have had. Many would argue that the "ought" in my statement is connected to rationality. In doing something *now* that you know frustrates the attainment of your future goal, you act irrationally. A more formal characterization of this intuition is: rationality demands that one take what one knows to be the necessary means to one's ends, so long as one maintains those ends. When this principle is stated as a command of how we ought to act we get: if a rational person wills and maintains an end, believes a certain available means is necessary to attaining it, she ought to also will the means, or give up the end.

Throughout this paper I will refer to this command as The Hypothetical Imperative.¹ I aim to establish the following three claims regarding this principle. First, I argue that The Hypothetical Imperative is, itself, a categorical command of reason. Second, one of the implications of the fact that The Hypothetical Imperative is categorically binding is that the Kantian way of distinguishing prudential from moral obligations fails. Finally, I consider three especially promising proposals for responding to the problem, but argue that they each fail.

§ I. The Significance of Differentiating Prudential from Moral Requirements

Non-philosophers and philosophers alike take there to be two distinct classes of reasons: moral and prudential. If it is the case that mocking someone for fun is immoral, then I have a moral reason not to do so. In contrast, I have a prudential reason to maintain my health, if I plan to live a long life with most of my faculties intact. This is not to say, however, that the reasons that recommend an action must be *either* moral or prudential. In fact, the recommendations of morality and prudence often coincide. As Kant famously claims, a shopkeeper has both moral and prudential reasons to refrain from cheating her customers.²

Despite the fact that morality and prudence often recommend the same course of action, there seems to be a fundamental difference between these classes of reasons. There are a number of factors to which we can point in support of this pre-theoretical intuition. First, the recommendations of morality and prudence can give conflicting

¹ I'm following Thomas E. Hill, Jr. in calling this principle The Hypothetical Imperative. See his book, *Dignity and Practical Reason* (Cornell University Press, 1992), chapter I, "The Hypothetical Imperative," for an in-depth discussion of this principle.

² Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Hill, Thomas E. Jr. and Arnulf Zweig trans. and eds. (Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 199, [4: 397].

advice, and when they do, the claims of morality are thought to trump the demands of prudence. Second, even when one has both moral and prudential reasons to act in a particular way, Kantians, at least, claim (1) that we have a choice about which of the reasons we act on, and (2) that our choice of which reasons we act on is a matter of some moral importance.

Finally, the distinctness of these two classes of reasons is manifested by the different attitudes we take towards immoral and imprudent actions. Most of us are no stranger to the shame that accompanies acting foolishly. We procrastinate, for instance, seeking to satisfy our (often urgently felt) short-term desires, even when we believe that doing so jeopardizes our long-term goals. Just as when we act immorally, when we act imprudently we reprimand ourselves. We do not advertise that we sometimes act carelessly or rashly nor do we take pride in having so acted. We often console ourselves by stating our intention to change and trying to rectify the situation. We declare that next year will be different. This is the stuff of New Year's resolutions.

Although we scold others and ourselves for acting imprudently, this kind of censure is thought to be at least of a different *degree* and possibly even of a different *kind* than the disapproval we justifiably feel when we believe that we or someone else has acted immorally. In violating prudential obligations, we typically are not, and feel we ought not to be subject to the kind of criticism we are rightly subject to when we violate moral obligations. We do not, generally speaking, take someone to be morally culpable for destroying her TV and thereby frustrating her intention to watch her favorite program.

This distinction between immoral and imprudent behavior is a valuable feature of our everyday discourse. Hence, any moral theory ought to be able to: (1) provide a

philosophical basis for the difference between moral and prudential reasons; (2) explain why moral reasons trump prudential ones; and (3) give an analysis of why imprudent actions are not and are rightly thought not to be as “bad” as immoral ones.³

Moreover, a generally received view is that one advantage of Kant’s moral theory and his theory as Kantians have developed it, is that it provides a principled basis for this distinction. Kantians and non-Kantians alike maintain that the difference between moral and prudential requirements lies in their “categoricity.” Moral commands, it is argued, differ from prudential ones in that the former are categorical while the later are (merely) hypothetical. However, if The Hypothetical Imperative—the fundamental principle of means-ends reasoning—is a categorical imperative, we must rethink what the difference between a moral and prudential obligation consists in.⁴

§ II: Categoricity is not the Sole Mark of the Moral

In Section II of the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*,⁵ Kant claims that there are two kinds of imperatives of reason: hypothetical and categorical. According to Kant and many Kantians, the crucial difference between hypothetical and categorical imperatives is that the former, but not the later, depend on rationally revisable ends.

³ I have, perhaps, stated the claim of what any moral theory must do too strongly. I do not mean to assume that moral reasons always trump non-moral reasons or that moral infractions are always worse than non-moral ones. I think a moral theory that argued that moral reasons do not always trump other reasons is a live possibility. All that I intend for the moment is the idea that a moral theory would need to explain why we take there to be a significant difference between moral and non-moral reasons for action.

⁴ At this point, one might reasonably wonder about the connection between The Hypothetical Imperative and prudence. To act imprudently, it is commonly thought, is to act against one’s own long-term self-interest. In contrast, a violation of The Hypothetical Imperative involves acting against an end that one sets and maintains. And, because rational agents are capable of setting goals that have no direct connection to one’s self-interest, one can act contrary to an instrumental reason she has but not, thereby, act imprudently. Still, one’s instrumental reasons and the reasons offered by prudence will coincide when it is the case that the agent sets her own long-term self-interest as an end. On my reading of Kant, prudential reasons are a sub-set of instrumental reasons.

⁵ Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Hill, Thomas E. Jr. and Arnulf Zweig trans. and eds. (Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 215-221, [4: 413 – 420].

Hypothetical imperatives demand a certain action in light of the agent having set for herself the attainment of some *rationaly contingent* purpose. Hence, an agent can escape or get out of a particular hypothetical prescription by giving up or changing her ends. It seems that this is importantly not the case with moral, that is, categorical imperatives. For instance, my prescription that you take the J bus in order to be home in 15 minutes is withdrawn (or ceases to be valid) if you are not headed home. Conversely, when I claim that you should not make fun of another person for sport, I do not withdraw this prescription upon learning that doing so is a necessary means to one of your ends. A moral prescription, it is thought, cannot be “gotten out of” or escaped by a change in the rationally contingent ends of those bound by it.

To forestall potential confusion, let me explain why a commonly held view of the difference between hypothetical and categorical imperatives is mistaken. Some have argued that the grammatical form of an imperative is an accurate indicator of the type of imperative it is. The form of a fully specified hypothetical imperative, according to this view, is, “If or when one seeks end E, one ought to do action A.” In contrast, the typical form of a categorical imperative would be *simply*, “One ought to do action A.”

This view is mistaken for a number of reasons.⁶ The one that concerns us, however, is the fact that moral requirements may take a conditional form. The terms “hypothetical” and “categorical” qualify (only) the necessity that the statement attributes to the *doing* of a given action. In a categorical requirement there is nothing to prevent the action itself (as distinct from the necessity to do the act) from being specified by the use of a conditional “if” or “when”. A categorical imperative may be of the form “if or when

⁶ For a detailed discussion of this issue see Thomas E. Hill, Jr., “The Hypothetical Imperative,” pp. 26-32, and John McDowell’s “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1978.

in circumstances C, one must do action A.” Should an agent find herself in the specified circumstances, she must do A, even though not every rational agent need find herself in those circumstances.

A. The Hypothetical Imperative

The focus of this paper is not *particular* hypothetical imperatives, of which there are many, but rather The Hypothetical Imperative. The Hypothetical Imperative is a prescriptive statement about how rational beings must act. It adjures us to take what we know to be the necessary and available means to our ends or else give up those ends. Kant never explicitly states The Hypothetical Imperative, though he hints at it.⁷ Nevertheless, it seems some principle like The Hypothetical Imperative is needed to ground particular hypothetical imperatives.⁸ Let me briefly explain my reason for thinking The Hypothetical Imperative is, indeed, a categorical one.

The feature that distinguishes a categorical from a hypothetical imperative is that a categorical imperative commands a certain course of conduct independently of any *other* purposes, goals, or ends the agent has. The Hypothetical Imperative tells us that we ought to take the necessary means to our ends or give them up. Now this imperative is binding on us insofar as we are rational agents, regardless of whether or not we *want, desire, or have an inclination* to comply with it. The Hypothetical Imperative does not, like particular hypothetical imperatives, declare an action to be rationally necessary in

⁷ Consider Kant’s claim that “the imperative that commands him who wills the end to will the means...is analytic”, Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Hill, Thomas E. Jr. and Arnulf Zweig trans. and eds. (Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 220 [4: 419].

⁸ I am not arguing that postulating something like The Hypothetical Imperative as a principle of reason is the only or the best response to the question of what grounds particular instrumental prescriptions. My argument is more modest. I claim only that such a principle is a presupposition of Kant’s claims regarding particular hypothetical imperatives.

light of it being a necessary means to an end we have set. It is not in virtue of having a desire to abide by The Hypothetical Imperative that it is a command of reason. Perhaps surprisingly, being bound by The Hypothetical Imperative does not depend on *desiring* to promote our projects, fulfill our goals, or lead an effective, productive life, even though we may have such a desire. The Hypothetical Imperative cannot be gotten out of by a change in an agent's rationally contingent ends.

I am not, however, suggesting that there is *no* difference between The Hypothetical Imperative and what is commonly referred to as The Categorical Imperative, just that what distinguishes them cannot be that one is categorical while the other is not. The Hypothetical Imperative is an unconditional command of reason. It does not depend on what an agent counts as essential to his or her happiness. The only way to *not* be subject to The Hypothetical Imperative is to have no ends whatsoever, which is not possible for a rational being.⁹ Its force cannot be withdrawn by giving up some particular end. Rather, a rational being is bound by it independent of the content of her ends.

B. The Hypothetical Imperative is not a Moral Principle

If my reasoning to this point has been sound, I have shown that The Hypothetical Imperative is a categorical command. But this is only half of what I need in order to establish my thesis that commanding categorically is not a sufficient condition for being a moral demand. This conclusion follows only if The Hypothetical Imperative is not a moral one. I provide two arguments in support of this conclusion.

First, if an agent followed only by The Hypothetical Imperative she would not necessarily act morally. There is no inconsistency in someone recognizing the rationality

⁹ A rational agent is, by definition, a being that acts purposefully—for the sake of some end.

of always taking the necessary means to her ends (or abandoning her ends) and acting in light of this recognition, but, nevertheless, acting immorally.¹⁰ More importantly, however, if all categorical imperatives, including The Hypothetical Imperative, are moral, we are forced to accept a counterintuitive claim. If The Hypothetical Imperative is a moral imperative, then we would be *morally* culpable for failing to take the necessary means to our ends, while maintaining our ends. I began with the suggestion that most of us are familiar with imprudent or instrumentally irrational acts and not proud of ourselves when we commit them, but we, nevertheless, view imprudent acts as less problematic than immoral ones. We do not think we deserve as much, and possibly not even the same kind of censure that we take ourselves to be rightly subject to when we commit an immoral act. If we insist that The Hypothetical Imperative is a moral principle—in virtue of its categoricity—Kant and Kantians lose this distinction.

Why so? Whatever problems there are with violating one categorical imperative, in virtue of it being a categorical imperative, should follow from violating any categorical imperative. That is, when I tell a self-interested lie or break a promise, I am subject to certain reprimands, from myself and others, because I violated a categorical command of rationality, namely The Categorical Imperative. So, in violating any other categorical imperative, like The Hypothetical Imperative, Kantians must, on pain of inconsistency, maintain that the same kind of reprimand is demanded. Neither Kant nor Kantians have provided a principled way of maintaining that it is *morally* problematic to violate one categorical imperative, in virtue of its categoricity, but deny that it would be problematic in *just the same way* to violate any other categorical imperative.

¹⁰ Kant, himself, suggests as much in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 6: 126 note. trs. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson. New York: Harper and Row, 1960.

§ III: Three Possibilities for Supplementing the Kantian View

As already mentioned, I think there are important differences between The Hypothetical Imperative and The Categorical Imperative. While Kantians and non-Kantians alike may have been wrong that categoricity is the sole mark of a moral demand, surely there is some *other* difference between these two commands of rationality that compellingly, non-arbitrarily grounds the distinction. I will consider three such possibilities and argue that all fail.

Proposal #1

We might think there is a crucial difference between The Hypothetical and Categorical Imperative in that empirical information about the world is needed before The Hypothetical Imperative issues any prescriptions at all, while this is not the case with the fundamental principle of morality.¹¹ In other words, one might think, as Kant at times seems to have, that particular categorical imperatives can be derived and particular actions prescribed, without any empirical knowledge of the world; particular categorical imperatives are derivable a priori. In order to make a particular hypothetical prescription, however, we will need various kinds of empirical knowledge. We require knowledge of: (1) the agent's ends, (2) the nature of particular cause and effect relationships, and (3) that we have the power to cause such effects.¹² These are all synthetic facts.

While I this is an interesting suggestion, I think it ultimately fails because it involves a misunderstanding of Kant's view. Although it is true that, according to Kant,

¹¹ I take this to be a version of one of the reasons Thomas E. Hill offers for thinking that The Hypothetical Imperative is a hypothetical command rather than a categorical one. See his Thomas E. Hill, Jr. in calling this principle The Hypothetical Imperative. See his book, *Dignity and Practical Reason* (Cornell University Press, 1992), chapter I, "The Hypothetical Imperative," for an in-depth discussion of this principle.

¹² H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative: A Study in Kant's Moral Philosophy* p. 125.

both the fundamental principle of morality and the fundamental principle of means-ends reasoning can be vindicated through the use of reason, he also maintains that we need empirical knowledge of the world to apply these principles to our current situation. This might seem to be in tension with another of Kant's claims. Kant, at times, suggests that "Though shall not lie" can be known to hold for all rational beings regardless of any empirical conditions.¹³ However, upon careful consideration, it seems Kant would be mistaken about this, if he indeed thought it was the case. Consider the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative: Act only on that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. We cannot derive particular prescriptions from this principle absent a specification of the agent's maxim. Arguably, a full specification of the agent's maxim must include information regarding the agent's ends.¹⁴ Second, what our specific moral obligations are depend upon the ends of the finite rational agents with whom we come into contact. Third, we will be unable to derive any particular moral categorical imperatives absent empirical, synthetic knowledge of the world including knowledge regarding causes and effects.¹⁵ Finally, if one were to insist that some actions, though not many, are derivable a priori from what the Categorical Imperative, one could point out that there is one prescription The Hypothetical Imperative generates, absent any empirical information. It forbids us to maintain an end and not take the necessary means to it.

¹³ Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Hill, Thomas E. Jr. and Arnulf Zweig trans. and eds. (Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 191, [4: 389].

¹⁴ See Christine Korsgaard's *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

¹⁵ See Thomas E. Hill, Jr. "Kantianism." In *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*. ed. Hugh LaFollette. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000.

Proposal #2

Version 1

In the case of moral imperatives the end for which the agent is directed to strive is a rationally necessary one. That is, moral imperatives specify ends that an agent must pursue just in virtue of being rational. Kant claims that there is an objective good that all rational agents *qua rational* take as their end. These are the so-called obligatory ends, which Kant maintains can be deduced from the purely formal principle of rational agency, namely The Categorical Imperative. In contrast, as already mentioned, the end of any particular hypothetical imperative is a *rationally contingent* one. This is the reason why someone can “get out of” a particular hypothetical imperative, but not a particular categorical one. If, in light of your end to attend law school, I tell you that you must take the LSAT, you cease to be obliged to take the test provide you give up the goal of attending law school. In contrast, if I ought to refrain from random acts of violence, there is no way around this “ought.” The fact that committing an act of violence is a necessary and available means to a rationally contingent end I have set for myself, say acquiring money, makes no difference. The obligation not to commit the act cannot be escaped because the end on which it depends is rationally mandatory; I would be irrational in failing to follow it. I would not be irrational, however, in giving up the end of acquiring money. Hence, it seems that the difference between particular categorical and hypothetical imperatives can be stated as follows: If a particular imperative can be escaped by the giving up a rationally contingent end, then the command is not a moral one.

Although initially promising, this proposal will also not serve the purpose of differentiating prudential from moral obligations. That an imperative does or does not depend on rationally contingent ends is too general a criterion. While the ends of *some* categorical imperatives may be rationally necessary, this is not true of all categorical commands. Take the imperfect duty of beneficence, for instance. According to Kant, I have an imperfect duty to promote the morally permissible ends of other agents. It is possible, even likely, that their morally permissible ends are rationally contingent. Hence, what I am in particular obligated to do will, at times, depend on the rationally contingent ends of other rational agents. Hence, it may be possible for me to get out of a moral duty that I have by a change in a rational being's contingent ends.

Version #2

Perhaps, however, the initial proposal was not stated precisely enough. While it is true that both hypothetical and categorical imperatives may be escaped by a change in rationally contingent ends (in light of which Version #1 fails), they seem to depend on *different* rationally contingent ends. That is, particular hypothetical imperatives can be escaped by an agent giving up one of *her own* ends. Whenever an agent is subject to a particular hypothetical imperative, she ceases to be bound by it if she gives up the end on which it depends. In contrast, in the case considered above—where I cease to be bound by a moral demand in light of a change in rationally contingent ends—it is not a change in *my own ends* that releases me from the obligation. I escape the moral imperative only in light of some *other* rational agent giving up a rationally contingent end. Although some moral obligations can be gotten out of by a change in the rationally contingent ends

of other rational beings, it does not seem that there are any that can be gotten out of by a change in the agent's own ends. The issue is not whether there are any moral imperatives that can be "gotten out of" by a change in the rationally contingent ends of other agents, but rather, whether these imperatives can be escaped by a change in the rationally contingent ends of the agent herself.

According to the second version of Proposal #2, I would cease to be morally obligated to do something in light of another rational agent changing her end, but I cannot get out of any moral obligation by changing one of *my own* rationally contingent ends. If I have a duty to help you promote a morally permissible, although rationally contingent end, and you cease willing it as an end, I cease to have a duty to help you achieve that end. This is substantially different from instances where a particular hypothetical imperative no longer applies to me. In such cases, it is a change in *my own ends* that releases me from the obligation I would otherwise have.

While this suggestion also shows initial promise, upon further reflection we can see that it is too restrictive. There are, in fact, some moral obligations that can be gotten out of by an agent giving up one of *her own* rationally contingent ends. Here's an example.¹⁶ Suppose you would like to borrow a book of mine, which I am happy to lend you. However, you do not think I am very good at behaving prudentially. In your experience of me, I do not tend to look after myself very well. Knowing I have this tendency and not wanting to contribute to such behavior, you ask me to promise to tell you if I need the book for my own research, and I agree.

¹⁶ I owe this line of thought and example to Thomas E. Hill, Jr. See *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Hill, Thomas E. Jr. and Arnulf Zweig trans. and eds. (Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 156, n. 70.

Further suppose that after I have lent you the book, I set as an end working on a paper, for which, as it turns out, I need the exact book I loaned you. What is my obligation in this instance? Well, it seems that it is a disjunctive one. I must either tell you to return my book or I must give up my end of writing the paper. What is crucial about this example for present purposes is the fact that I can get out of my obligation to tell you to return the book provided I forego my rationally contingent end of writing the paper. Hence, the proposed difference between particular hypothetical and categorical imperatives will not hold.

Perhaps, however, my response to the second version of Proposal #2 goes by too quickly. There is a potentially important difference between what are typically thought of as hypothetical imperatives—such as “Take the LSAT, if you want to go to law school”—and moral imperatives like the one described above in the book lending example. When I am subject to a hypothetical imperative, such as “you ought to take the LSAT,” I can escape it by giving up the end, which serves as the condition of the imperative. The action I am directed to perform is a necessary means to the rationally contingent end that I can give up and thereby cease to be bound by the imperative. Moreover, the reason why I am subject to a prescription like “you ought to take the LSAT” is because it specifies a means that is indispensable to an end I have set and maintain.

In light of these important features, it seems that a Kantian could suggest the following as a way of differentiating particular hypothetical and categorical imperatives. A command is hypothetical if the prescribed action is a means to the rationally contingent end that I can give up and thereby cease to be bound by the imperative. The reason for

performing the action is that it furthers this end. In a categorical imperative, in contrast, the action prescribed is not a means to furthering the end that grounds the prescription and the implicit reason for performing the act is not that it furthers the end, which is the condition of the applicability of the prescription. In the book-lending case, for instance, the precept that I am subject to—namely to tell you I need the book or abandon my end—is not a means to the rationally contingent end that I can abandon, i.e. the writing of the paper, in order to get out of the obligation.

Although the two cases are not analogous in the way describe above, I do not think this difference is significant. Surely there are some non-moral, i.e. hypothetical imperatives, of the form “Do action A, given end E” where the doing of A is not properly understood as a necessary causal condition to attaining E, but is rather more naturally understood as a constituent of E. For instance, suppose I have set the end of being a good life-partner. Loving my partner, it seems, is *not* a necessary causal condition of being a good life-partner, of achieving my end. Rather, loving him or her is part of what it is *to be* a good life-partner.¹⁷ But, perhaps more importantly, it is unclear why we should think that the imperatives that direct us to do something in order to attain an end are merely prudential or instrumental commands while others are moral one. This fact alone would not establish a significant difference between these reasons for action.

Proposal #3

Finally, consider the following seeming difference between The Hypothetical Imperative and The Categorical Imperative. The Categorical Imperative provides us

¹⁷ Christine Korsgaard argues for a similar claim in “The Normativity of Instrumental Reason.” In *Ethics and Practical Reason*, p. 215-16.

moral reasons to act while The Hypothetical Imperative only provides us with prudential reasons, because The Categorical Imperative yields sufficient reasons. If one acts contrary to the commands that follow from The Categorical Imperative, one has gone against what she had most reason to do. In contrast, it seems that one can refuse to abide by a particular hypothetical imperative without being irrational. For instance, if the following hypothetical imperative is derived “You ought to exercise three times a week,” one could fail to follow this prescription and still be rational, provided one gives up the end of maintaining her health.

Notice, though, that the reasoning given above is compelling only in light of the case being under-described. If I fail to exercise as required, and I also give up my end for which the exercise is necessary, I have not gone against a particular hypothetical imperative. Rather, in abandoning the end, the hypothetical imperative ceases to apply to me. One only acts contrary to a particular hypothetical imperative if one sets something as an end, maintains it as an end, and fails to take any necessary means to it. In such an instance, the person has acted irrationally. As long as she maintains her end, she has sufficient reason to pursue what she knows to be available and necessary means to it.

Second, even if it is the case that a particular hypothetical imperative does not provide an agent with sufficient reason to do something, because she could always get out of it by giving up the end on which it depends, this is not true of The Hypothetical Imperative. The Hypothetical Imperative provides us with sufficient reason to not do one thing: set something as an end, maintain it as an end, and fail to take what one knows to be available and necessary means to it. If we do this, we have acted irrationally.

I have argued that The Hypothetical Imperative is a categorical command and called attention to a significant implication of this claim for Kantians. That is, if The Hypothetical Imperative is a categorical one, then the standard account of the difference between prudential and moral obligations fails. I have also reviewed three initially plausible proposals of how a Kantian might try to get around the problem I have raised and argued that they ultimately fail. This leaves open the question, however, of whether there is another proposal I have not considered that will do the job. My point is merely that those who distinguish between prudential and moral obligations in this way have a problem to solve. Moreover, Kantians, in particular, need to solve the problem of distinguishing prudential from moral obligations, since this difference is at the heart of their moral theory. Until they do so, they have not told us what morality is, or what their moral theory is supposed to be a theory of.