

DAWES HICKS LECTURE

THE RATIONAL IMPERATIVE: KANT  
AGAINST HUME

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KANT and Hume held radically different views on the place of reason in practical matters. Hume's view, which makes reason the slave of the passions, is the easier to understand and at first sight much the more attractive; certainly it commands vastly more support today than any position which can plausibly be ascribed to Kant. What Kant holds is that the imperative of morality, the categorical imperative, is rational intrinsically. It is rational not in the sense that it tells us how best to achieve some end laid down by passion, but simply by being what pure practical reason dictates. I should like to explore what this involves, for I think that Kant's position is a great deal more defensible than is often allowed. In fact it can be defended largely by his own arguments.

It is hardly surprising he should have a reply to Hume, for at one time he saw himself as largely agreeing with him in moral philosophy. In the mid-1760s he seems to have regarded himself as more or less affiliated to the moral sense school, whose main representatives he took to be Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Hume.<sup>1</sup> The subsequent development of his own position was

<sup>1</sup> See his *Announcement of Lectures for the Winter Semester 1765-6*, Ak. II: 311, and K. Ward, *The Development of Kant's View of Ethics* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1972), Chap. 2. Here and in what follows 'Ak.' stands for the Berlin Academy edition of *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*; the *Critique of Pure Reason* is referred to in the usual A/B form, 'A' being the first edition and 'B' the second; for the *Critique of Practical Reason* page references are given to the Academy edition and to T. K. Abbott's translation, *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings* (Longmans, London, 6th edn, 1909). The *Grundlegung* is referred to in the text by its German short title because the title is translated into English in several ways; page references are to the Academy edition and the second (German) edition, both of which are indicated in the margins of H. J. Paton's translation, which is published as *The Moral Law* (Hutchinson, London, 1948) and on which I draw for quotations.

therefore the development of a reaction to Hume, amongst others. He classifies Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Hume together because they all trace moral approbation, and moral motivation, back to some feature of human psychology. For Shaftesbury and Hutcheson this is a feeling of benevolence, universally directed towards everyone. For Hume also our moral attitudes are derived from feelings natural to us, and (at least in the *Enquiry*) benevolence has again a principal role to play, though the benevolence he regards as natural is more limited, not so universal in its scope.<sup>2</sup> This is an important difference, but what is more important to Kant is that they all derive morality from feeling, and leave no place for pure practical reason and its categorical commands. He would have classified together with them a great many moral philosophers of the present day, who in one or another fashion attempt a similar approach.

His argument against them has two stages. In the first two chapters of the *Grundlegung* he seeks to analyse what is involved in 'the common rational knowledge of morality', in other words to examine what the ordinary person, reflecting on the nature of morality, will take it to involve if he carries his reflection through with sufficient care and accuracy. At this stage the objection is that the accounts offered by Hume and the others fail to fit with what we are ordinarily committed to, as revealed by this process of reflective analysis. Kant recognizes, however, that the view of morality we are thus committed to may be mistaken. In that case morality proper, morality as analysed in these first two chapters, will be a delusion, 'a mere phantom of the brain'. The third chapter of the *Grundlegung* has the task of showing that that is not so, and that morality proper is not just a phantom of the brain.<sup>3</sup> It will turn out to be essential for this that he should be right in the main outline of his claim about what the ordinary rational person is committed to.

What matters is the main outline, for his analysis in the first two chapters takes us further than we need to go for present purposes. How the categorical imperative should be formulated, and what the relationship may be between the various formulations Kant proposes, is something we need not concern ourselves with. What matters for us, and for Kant's main objective, is not

<sup>2</sup> In the *Enquiry* this is not always made as clear as one might like, but see paras. 185–6 in the edition by L. A. Selby-Bigge (*Hume's Enquiries*, Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 1902). Benevolence is also, even in the *Enquiry*, not the only feeling involved.

<sup>3</sup> *Grundlegung*, Ak. IV: 392 and 445, = pp. xiv and 95f.

the content of the moral law, but his conception of the law itself, as an imperative which is intrinsically rational. For Hume and the others morality was a matter of feeling, not of reason; the function of reason was to work things out, and there was consequently a place for reason in practical affairs, but only in the working out of effective means to ends set by feeling, and in the determining of how best to gratify our non-rational sentiments. Kant considers in contrast that the reflective analysis of ordinary moral consciousness shows us that we are committed to regarding the moral law as a rational imperative, which is categorical in the sense that it obliges us for its own sake and not because of any further objectives we may have. If it is to be rational at all, then, it must be in some sense other than Hume's, for its rationality is not the slave of any passion.

What then does Kant mean by calling it a rational imperative? At least one can say two things directly. He is not just making a verbal point about how we use the word 'reason'. If he had been he would have been in no disagreement with Hume, who recognizes that we apply the word—'by a natural abuse of terms'—to a certain 'calm determination of the passions'.<sup>4</sup> Nor is he simply making the point that there is a difference in kind between moral approval and moral motivation on the one hand, and our less sophisticated feelings and desires on the other. That again Hume recognizes, for although he classifies them all as passions he admits great differences amongst the passions. Others have felt that to classify them as passions at all conflates morality too closely with emotion or desire, and a number of people have stressed the difference between doing something because of the desires that one has and doing something because one thinks one ought to. Kant would agree that there are these differences, but would say that one might admit them and still belong essentially in the camp of Hutcheson and Hume. For what is fundamentally wrong about their position is not that it derives morality from feeling rather than from some other kind of psychological state, but that it grounds it in nothing more than human psychology.

In calling it a rational imperative one thing he means is that it is binding on all rational beings, just in virtue of the fact that they are rational: it is not 'subject to contingent conditions and exceptions', or 'valid only under the contingent conditions of humanity'.<sup>5</sup> By saying this Kant does not mean it must be so

<sup>4</sup> *Enquiry*, para. 196; *Treatise*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford University Press, 1888), p. 583.

<sup>5</sup> *Grundlegung*, Ak. IV: 408 = pp. 28f.

abstract as not to permit of practical applications which take into account the particular circumstances of the case, but that what it lays down for a given agent it lays down equally for any other rational agent, human or not, if—perhaps *per impossibile*—that agent were to find itself under similar circumstances. So the imperative must be of universal application. Kant infers from this that it must itself be universal in form, requiring like cases to be treated alike and enjoining a certain equality of respect for all rational beings. What exactly that amounts to, and how successfully he develops his account of what the categorical imperative involves, need not however concern us.

There are two other things he means by calling the moral law a rational imperative. He means that it is knowable a priori, as the laws of logic are, or the other principles of theoretical reason; and that it is objectively valid, in the sense in which they are objectively valid. That is to say, it is a valid law, and binding upon us, regardless of what we think about it either individually or collectively, and regardless of what our individual or collective attitudes may be towards it. It is not the product of attitudes that are natural to us or developed in us by society; it is valid independently of us and of our psychology, just as—for Kant as for Frege—the laws of logic are. The comparison with the laws of logic is one that he himself draws, and as we shall see it is a helpful one.

It may be thought that to claim such objectivity for the categorical imperative is incompatible with his insistence upon our autonomy, upon the need for us to legislate for ourselves. But in saying that as autonomous agents we must legislate for ourselves Kant does not mean to imply that we have any choice as to what we legislate. The moral law is objectively valid, and it is unique. What he means is that we must adopt it as a motive. Although objective, the law is also prescriptive, in a sense something like Hare's. Awareness of the moral law is importantly different from the awareness of some matter of fact. Ordinary factual beliefs do not by themselves constitute motives, in the absence of a relevant desire: the knowledge that an avalanche is approaching is likely to make me seek to avoid its path, but only because I am not likely to want to be swallowed up by it. If I did have so unusual a want, I should no doubt throw myself into it enthusiastically. My awareness of the moral law, on the other hand, is not separable in principle from my making it a motive for my action. Anyone—if there is anyone—for whom the moral law is not a motive, cannot be aware of the law at all.

Of course we do not always act on the moral motive; Kant thinks we cannot be quite sure that we ever do.<sup>6</sup> But to say that is not to deny that it is a motive for us. Desires also are motives, and many people have desires on which they never act; desires, perhaps, on which they never would act in any imaginable circumstances, but which are desires of theirs nevertheless. In the same way, Kant thinks, the moral law remains a motive for everyone who is conscious of it, even if they are so thoroughly wicked that under no imaginable circumstances would they actually act on it. It remains a motive, in the way that a secret desire remains a motive, swamped by other motives and prevented by them from leading to action but present all the same. Thus it is not quite in Hare's sense that the Kantian imperative is prescriptive, for Hare regards a moral imperative as fully prescriptive only if it actually leads to action when the occasion offers.<sup>7</sup> All that Kant claims is that to be conscious of the moral law is to be motivated by it. Still, that claim is strong enough to make it seem puzzling how the moral law can be both prescriptive, in that sense, and also objective in the strong sense Kant requires: independent of our beliefs about it and our attitudes towards it.

J. L. Mackie gave expression to this puzzlement when he said that if objective values combined these features 'they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe'; they would be 'queer'.<sup>8</sup> As it stands this is not much of an argument. It seems hardly surprising that values should turn out to be importantly different from tables or magnitudes. It is also worth noticing that Kant does not speak of objective *values*, but of an objective imperative or an objective law. The word 'value' is perhaps vague enough to encourage the thought that moral values might be expected to turn out to be like things or properties of more ordinary kinds; the word 'law' leaves no room for any such suggestion. What it may suggest is the picture of an externally given law, laid down by God or by the state; such a law however would not be prescriptive in the appropriate sense, and it is to remove that picture that Kant stresses that it must be we ourselves that legislate the law.

Still, something puzzling remains, even if Mackie has not quite captured it. The trouble, I think, is that it looks as though it is

<sup>6</sup> *Grundlegung*, Ak. IV: 407 = p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford University Press, 1963), Chap. 5.

<sup>8</sup> J. L. Mackie, *Ethics* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977), p. 38.

essential to the objective law, as Kant conceives it, that it should motivate us; yet it is evidently a fact about us what motives we have. How then can the law be objective in the strong sense of 'objective' that Kant requires? To be objective in that sense, it must hold independently of what we think about it and of our attitudes to it. In that case, if it is genuinely objective, surely it cannot be essential to it that it evoke any particular attitude or reaction in us, like motivating us in a certain way. And if it is essential to it that it produce such a result in us, it cannot be genuinely objective.

Kant's reply is that it is not essential to the law that it motivate us, any more than it is essential to the laws of logic that we should guide our reasoning by them. For it is not essential to the laws of logic that we should exist, or that beings of any kind should be conscious of them. Nor is it essential to the moral law that we should exist, or that any rational being should. But because the law is what it is—a law, an imperative—the consciousness of it motivates, and necessarily motivates, any being that is aware of it. It motivates not only human beings, but also beings of any other kind. Kant says 'rational beings', but the word 'rational' implies no substantive restriction—any being that could be conscious of the moral law would automatically count as rational, just as any being conscious of the laws of logic would.

Because it motivates all such beings, and not just human beings, Kant is committed to rejecting any analogy between the moral imperative and the secondary qualities. The idea that moral qualities are much like secondary qualities is one Hutcheson sometimes suggests, and it has had influential supporters recently. The suggestion can take either of two forms, depending on how secondary qualities are regarded. On one view they are dispositional properties of things, and it is definitive of something's being red that it should appear in a certain way to normal human observers under normal circumstances. On that account for something to be good would *be* for it to produce a certain sort of reaction in standard human beings under standard circumstances. This does not seem satisfactory, because (as Kant says) we think morality is not particularly to do with human beings, but applies equally to any other intelligent beings there may be—Martians, God, etc. An alternative view identifies secondary qualities not with the dispositions themselves but with the physical properties of things in which these dispositions are grounded. But if we apply that to morals we seem to lose our grip

on the fact that the moral law is a *law*. On this view moral properties would actually be physical or quasi-physical properties of things which happen as a matter of contingent fact to motivate human beings, and might well have quite a different effect on Martians. But the moral law is something of a quite different kind. It is an objective law, and as such its nature is to motivate any beings there may be, of whatever kind, that are aware of it at all. No account of it can be adequate which makes its motivational force depend upon the 'special constitution of human nature'.

From the fact that the law is objective it does not follow that it is any kind of object, or any kind of property of objects. It is what it is, in its own right. Being a law, it motivates all who are aware of it, but it is no more dependent on them than a magnet is dependent on the filings it attracts. Being objective, however, it must be possible for us to be mistaken about it: a minimal condition on the objectivity of anything is that it must be possible, at least in principle, to be wrong about it, and this must be so here. Between my prescriptive consciousness of the law and the law itself there is a logical distinction, and therefore there is a possibility that the two should fail to match. Is there a tension here? It may appear so, but that only shows that some care is needed. What is perfectly possible—indeed it happens all the time, as Kant would very much agree—is that I should mistake the *content* of the moral law. In much the same way one can make mistakes about what logic requires. Such mistakes can be corrected in familiar ways, by more careful reflection, by comparing notes with others, and so on; in practice this may be a matter of very great difficulty, too great at times for most of us to manage. This is the kind of mistake that has to be possible if the law is to be objective. What Kant will not admit is that I might be conscious of the law, but without being motivated by it in any way, and this at first sight seems odd: why should not this kind of mistake—a mistake about its obligatoriness—be just as possible as a mistake about its content? Kant's answer would be, I take it, that the law is so essentially a law, so intrinsically imperative, that if I were conscious simply of a set of precepts as it were externally given, without feeling any motivation to follow them, there would be no ground for saying that I was aware of the *law* at all; what I was aware of would be something of a wholly different kind or category. I cannot be aware of a typewriter and mistake it for a feeling of pain or a balance of payments deficit. I

can be said to be aware of something, but mistaken about it, only if I get right enough that is essential about it to warrant the claim that I am aware of *it*, and here that is lacking.<sup>9</sup>

Again the parallel with the laws of logic holds. Being principles of inference, and not merely propositions, the fundamental laws of logic are again *laws*. Kant calls them rules, 'necessary rules', and repeatedly uses deontic language in connection with them: they tell us 'not how we think but how we ought to think'.<sup>10</sup> We should see them, no doubt, not as requiring us to draw specific inferences, but as allowing us to draw some and prohibiting us from drawing others; but they remain in the imperative mood. One can make mistakes about what these laws are and what they require, and people often do. But someone could not be said to be aware of them at all unless he recognized them *as* principles legitimizing inference.

In calling the categorical imperative a rational imperative, then, Kant means that it is objective, and that one cannot be conscious of it without being motivated by it. He means also that our awareness of it is non-empirical. This does not of course imply that we cannot learn about it through experience, by reading books and by being taught, for we commonly learn arithmetic in that way, and Kant certainly regards arithmetic as *a priori*. But we do not have to learn about it through experience, or to appeal to experience if we are asked for a justification of what we take ourselves to apprehend. Indeed we could never, in principle, establish it or justify it satisfactorily by appeal to experience. His reason for thinking this is not that experience can never justify an imperative: it can perhaps justify a hypothetical imperative, by helping to show that the means proposed are effective in achieving the given end. But experience can never

<sup>9</sup> One can mistake a cloud for Juno, as he recognizes in the *Grundlegung* (Ak. IV: 426 = p. 61), but he uses that as a parallel for mistaking one kind of motivating principle for another. That he thinks is possible, and very different from mistaking the law for something that is not a motivating principle at all. The latter kind of mistake Kant excludes by his thesis that the will of every rational being must be considered as prescribing the law for itself (Ak. IV 431f. = pp. 70ff.). If, however, somebody wished to argue that this overstates the case, and that one could still be accounted 'aware of the law' if one knew of its content without recognizing its obligatoriness, that would make no significant difference: the point is that obligatoriness is an objective and essential feature of the law, and one that must be recognized by anyone who recognizes the law for what it is.

<sup>10</sup> Kant, *Logic*, Ak. IX: 14 = p. 16 in the translation by R. Hartman and W. Schwarz (Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis and New York, 1974).

justify a categorical imperative, because it is an imperative which holds independently of anyone's actual ends, independently of their circumstances, and independently of their psychological or physiological nature—independently of anything that can be known empirically about the agent or the conditions of action. It is an imperative which binds all rational beings, human or not; it is an imperative which motivates all rational beings, human or not, who are aware of it at all. These are not things experience could tell us.

Here the parallel with logical laws continues to hold, for experience could not establish their validity either. The same applies to those other principles of theoretical reason the need for which Kant argues in the first *Critique*. They are universal and necessary, whereas, in his own words, 'to try to squeeze necessity out of an empirical proposition, like water from a stone, and thereby to provide real universality for a judgement, is a straightforward contradiction.'<sup>11</sup> They are again rules, objective imperatives, prescriptions laying down how we ought to reason. Such rules are unavoidably required, because the data of experience require interpretation, and the principles by which we interpret them cannot be found amongst the data themselves. On the necessity for such principles, supplied to experience in the articulation of it, Kant saw more clearly than his empiricist predecessors; to have established it is a decisive achievement, and one that survives the rejection of his transcendental idealism. I shall return to this later.

It ought to be agreed, I think, that Kant's picture of the rational imperative of morality is not obviously incoherent. It is a universal imperative, in the sense that it applies equally to all rational beings; it is an objective law, as the principles of theoretical reasoning also are; our awareness of it is non-empirical, as our awareness of them must likewise be. It seems to me also that he is right to say that this is indeed how we conceive of morality.

That the moral law applies to all rational beings, as the principles of theoretical inference likewise do, would seem to accord with what we normally think: it does not apply to us just because we have a certain psychological or physiological make-up. Intelligent Martians, if there were any, *ought* to show a concern for one another's welfare, and for ours as well. It might be, perhaps, that we found the Martians were blind to morality,

<sup>11</sup> *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak. V: 12 = Abbott p. 97.

although rational in theoretical matters; in that case we could not hold them to blame for their failure to act morally in the way that we hold one another to blame, but their failure would still be a fault, as it is in the case of humans who suffer such blindness (if indeed there are any). That we view morality as prescriptive, in the sense that to be conscious of a moral imperative is to have it as a motive, is something I cannot properly defend here, but a powerful case has been made for it by Hare.<sup>12</sup> A major reason, if not the major reason, why people have doubted it has been the suspicion that a principle cannot coherently be held to be both prescriptive and objective; and it is accepted by most people that, whether we are right to or not, we do ordinarily regard the principles of morality as objective. I have argued however that this suspicion has no basis. And if the ordinary person is committed to viewing morality as a matter of objective universal law, he must presumably (if he thinks about it) regard this law as being knowable a priori, since it could not be established by experience.

Many of those whose sympathies lie with Hume are quite happy to agree that this is our ordinary view of morality, or what our ordinary view entails. They claim only that our ordinary view is mistaken. The moral law may indeed be prescriptive, but it reflects attitudes which we hold, perhaps in virtue of our common human nature, perhaps in virtue of the social conditions in which we find ourselves. In thinking of it as objective we are projecting our standards on to the world, and once we have taken this step it is natural, but of course mistaken, to think of morality as needing some kind of non-empirical awareness. We make no mistake, however, in faulting or condemning Martians, or other people, who do not share these standards of ours, because our condemnations reflect our attitudes and our attitudes, as a matter of fact, are wide ranging enough to apply not only to our own behaviour but to that of rational beings of whatever kinds there may be. But the attitudes are our attitudes; the objectivity is a projection; and our ordinary belief that it is more than that is only an illusion.

There are others, however, who share the view that the law's objectivity is a projection of our attitudes, but who think there is no real incompatibility between this and what we ordinarily believe. One such group holds the radical view, sometimes associated with Wittgenstein, that it is our beliefs and our

<sup>12</sup> Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford University Press, 1952).

attitudes—or more properly the beliefs and attitudes of the community—which determine truth and objectivity in general, not only in moral matters but in matters of non-moral fact as well. On this view moral judgements can claim objective truth-value in much the same way that judgements of any other kind can, so that the ordinary endorsement of their objectivity can be accepted. This is a large-scale and far-reaching idea, and I cannot adequately discuss it here; but it does seem to me that any such theory, which makes our beliefs or attitudes determinant of truth not just in a specific area but in general, is bound to be self-defeating: self-defeating because it can give no satisfactory account of the truth, or the fact, that we hold a certain belief or attitude. The matter is, however, complex, and it deserves an extended treatment, which I have tried to give it elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Without going into these issues, though, it seems legitimate to observe that although one might be led into such a theory by general philosophical considerations, the claim that it accords with what we ordinarily believe is hardly very persuasive. And it is this claim that we are particularly concerned with at the moment. Most people think it quite obvious that the truth of a proposition is something wholly independent of human beliefs about it or human attitudes towards it, whether the beliefs and the attitudes are those of individuals or of communities.

An alternative suggestion, developed most fully by Simon Blackburn,<sup>14</sup> accepts this so far as our ordinary conception of non-moral truth is concerned, but maintains that the truth and objectivity we claim for moral judgements are different in kind, and entirely compatible with their status as reflections or projections of our attitudes. Blackburn calls the resulting position quasi-realism, because it accepts as correct our ordinary claims about moral reality but gives them an interpretation which denies the realist commitment that Kant (for example) ascribed to them. This again deserves an extensive discussion, which I cannot give it here. It seems to me, however, that although Blackburn can interpret the things people say and do in a way

<sup>13</sup> In my book *The Coherence Theory of Truth* (Routledge, London, 1988), esp. Chap. 7.

<sup>14</sup> S. W. Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (Oxford University Press, 1984), Chap. 6; 'Rule-following and Moral Realism', in S. Holtzman and C. Leich (eds), *Wittgenstein: to Follow a Rule* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1981); 'Errors and the Phenomenology of Value', in T. Honderich (ed.), *Morality and Objectivity* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1985). I have discussed his position more fully in *The Coherence Theory of Truth*, pp. 29ff. and 217ff.

that is internally coherent, his interpretation does not capture what they actually think. He accepts, for example, that many people find their commitment to morality weakened when they come to believe it grounded only in human attitudes, but he accounts for this as simply the result of other attitudes they hold. Someone may feel that moral obligation can only *matter* if it has a basis that is objective in the fullest sense: that is an attitude, one which under these circumstances leads him to take his moral obligations less seriously. (Someone else, of course, may feel that nothing can be more important than morality, regardless of its source or status, and that again is an attitude, in consequence of which his respect for moral obligation will not be affected in the least.) But I doubt if this sort of explanation is generally right. In many cases, at least, what happens is that in abandoning the thesis of moral objectivity people come to feel that morality itself has collapsed. It is not that they are left with a modified value system, determined by their fundamental attitudes, as it should be on Blackburn's view of the matter; it is rather that they are left for a time lost and rudderless. Their attitudes had been founded on an assumption they have now given up. This is why existentialists have been so upset about the death of God.

I think then that Kant is right to claim that what he calls the common rational knowledge of morality, in other words the ordinary conception of what morality involves, does turn out on examination to be committed to regarding morality as a matter of objective law, binding on all rational beings. As he says, this leaves open the possibility that morality as thus conceived is a mere phantom of the brain, and that all that is available to us is the *Ersatz* provided by Hume and by those who think like him. That is the question for the final chapter of the *Grundlegung*. But what emerges from that chapter—at first sight rather disappointingly—is that a *proof* of the objectivity of the law is impossible in principle. All we can do is to answer the objections of those who think it cannot be objective. 'Nothing is left but *defence*—that is, to repel the objections of those who profess to have seen more deeply into the essence of things.' But nothing more is needed. For it also emerges that once we have answered these objections, and seen why the proof we wanted is impossible, we can also see why it is not necessary.<sup>15</sup>

In this chapter he considers just one objection from his opponents, the objection that because the world is a deterministic

<sup>15</sup> *Grundlegung*, Ak. IV: 459, 463 = pp. 121, 127f.

system, there is no room for the freedom of the will. Whether this *is* a serious objection depends first on whether one thinks the world is deterministic, and secondly on whether one agrees with Kant that moral obligation requires freedom in the strong sense he thinks it does. His solution, by distinguishing a phenomenal standpoint from which our actions are determined and a noumenal standpoint from which they are free, would be unnecessary for anyone who regarded moral responsibility and determinism as compatible in a straightforward way.

Given the attention he paid to Hume and Hutcheson earlier on, we might have expected him to consider another objection here. He has shown that their view of morality is not the one to which the ordinary reflective person is committed, but he has not shown that it is not true. The moral law cannot be objective, in the sense of obtaining independently of what anyone thinks or feels about it, if it is nothing more than a projection of human attitudes or sentiments. Now this opposing view of morals can take a variety of forms which differ considerably in detail, but these can be divided into two types. One version—roughly, Hutcheson's—just observes that people do make moral assessments and recognize moral obligations; it regards this as just being a basic fact about human feelings and preferences. Hume's version on the other hand does not treat it as a basic fact. It recognizes that our natural inclinations, including those towards charity and benevolence, extend most strongly towards our close associates, and it recognizes also that morality demands of us a universality of concern that these natural inclinations lack. It therefore attempts to find some way of bridging the gap.

Against Hume, Kant has an argument available, though he does not deploy it in this final chapter. It is present in what he said earlier about the universality of the moral law, and the impossibility of deriving that aspect of it from experience. He was there really making a double point: not only that our knowledge of a fully universal law could find no empirical justification, but also that our belief in it could not be traced to any empirical source. Hume finds its source in the feelings that are natural to us, and above all in self-love and sympathy. But our concern for the welfare of others, though in the first place limited to those who are close to us or from whom we may expect some reciprocal benefit, becomes universal through the operation of what he calls 'general rules'. Kant would object that this is no explanation at all. It solves the problem of how our feelings of

sympathy for particular individuals can give rise to a universal concern for humanity, simply by announcing it solved.

Admittedly Hume does claim to have an argument here, but Hume—for once—was muddled. The argument goes by analogy. He observes that in our judgements of size, and in our estimates of perceptual appearances generally, we need to correct our immediate impressions by making allowance for factors like distance and perspective, in order to talk about a public world of objects. In just the same way, he infers, we must correct the limited perspective of our sentiments: 'General language, therefore, being formed for general use, must be moulded on some more general views, and must affix the epithets of praise or blame, in conformity to sentiments, which arise from the general interests of the community'. This hardly follows, and is not helped by the remarkable assertion that people 'could never converse with us' unless we shared with them the same 'general unalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners'. In both kinds of case he says that what is operative is 'a principle of human nature, . . . that men are mightily addicted to *general rules*'.<sup>16</sup> But in the first type of case, the perceptual one, what the general rules do is to enable me to make a judgement about an object. What they actually are is inductive generalizations, which allow me to make inferences about how appearances change when circumstances alter. They 'correct my perception' in the sense that they inhibit me from drawing from it the first conclusion that might otherwise come to mind, e.g. that a distant cloud is no bigger than my hand. They do not give me a different perception. Its sensory content remains unchanged, though I may now interpret it differently. In the case of our sentiments inductive generalizations are useless. They might again enable us to make judgements—judgements about what we *would* feel if we found ourselves with the Emperor Nero or the flood victims of Bangladesh. But of themselves such judgements do not alter what I actually do feel, any more than they could alter the sensory content of my perception. What Hume had to explain was how our limited sympathies and confined benevolence could generate an *attitude* of universal approval. And of this he has given no account.

Kant would have a similar objection to modern attempts to derive our moral attitudes from empirical sources. They cannot explain their universality. The Freudian super-ego, which inter-

<sup>16</sup> *Enquiry*, para. 186; *Treatise*, p. 551.

nalizes the authority of one's father, cannot do it unless one's father's commands were universal themselves, and if they were, then that still requires explanation. (In fact most actual fathers' commands are rather limited in scope.) The appeal to social conditioning can explain why children grow up willing to respect other members of the group, but not why they should have a universal concern for humanity or for all rational, or even sentient, beings. In the same way an attractive evolutionary account can be offered of why natural selection should favour a gene for limited altruism, but there is no reason at all why natural selection should favour those who extend their concerns far beyond the circle of people with whom they ever will or ever could come in contact. In recent years these points have been made by others, but Kant already has the essence of the argument, by objecting generally to empirical accounts that they cannot explain why we should regard the law as universal.

There remains the alternative strategy of saying that it is just a basic psychological fact about human beings that we do feel such universal concern, at least to some degree, and that that is all there is to it. Against this it is more difficult to argue, though it is also difficult to find any particular argument in its favour. It amounts simply to observing that human beings have moral views, and then asserting that this is due to human psychology and has no further ontological implications. For some obscure reason it is natural to human beings to think and behave as if there were an objective moral law binding on all rational beings; but there isn't. Kant's basic objection to this is not made explicitly in the *Grundlegung* but in the preface to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and it is that just the same could be said of any case where we claim to rely on a priori principles. Our conviction that the truth of  $p$  excludes the truth of not- $p$  could similarly be written off as a mere fact of our psychology. To reject the a priori altogether he regards as absurd, an absurdity from which—perhaps wrongly—he exonerates Hume.<sup>17</sup> The briskness of his dismissal here is fair enough, seeing how elaborate a defence of a priori principles was provided by the first *Critique*.

In the first *Critique* the laws of logic are held to be 'absolutely necessary rules of thought',<sup>18</sup> but Kant also argues the need for a priori theoretical principles of two further kinds, constitutive and regulative. The regulative principles are more closely analogous

<sup>17</sup> *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak. V: 12ff. = Abbott pp. 97ff.

<sup>18</sup> A 52/B 76.

to the moral law than the constitutive principles are. Constitutive principles give us the framework of the world of appearances, which is a transcendently ideal world, being in part the product of our minds, and they are therefore self-justifying in a peculiar way: they apply only to the world of appearances, and at the same time so determine the character of that world that the conclusions to which they lead are bound to be true in it. This is because the world of appearances is the result of our synthesizing what is given in sense by reading these principles—along with the categories and the forms of intuition—into it. Neither the moral law nor the regulative principles are self-justifying in this way.

The moral law cannot be if it is to have the full-blooded objectivity Kant claims for it, a validity which is independent of our beliefs about it and our attitudes towards it. Judgements about the world of appearances can claim objectivity of a kind, of course, but it is not objectivity of that kind. It is an objective world in the sense that it is common to all human observers, indeed to all observers with spatial and temporal intuition, and in the sense that the particular empirical judgements we make about it are always liable to be mistaken. (They can be corrected, in principle, by acquiring more sensory evidence and by interpreting it with sufficient care in the light of the constitutive principles.) It is however *not* objective in the sense of being independent of our thoughts about it and attitudes towards it. The moral law claims objectivity in this stronger sense, a radical independence of us and of our nature; it claims validity for all rational beings, not just those constituted as we are.

Nor can regulative principles have the self-justifying character which results from being imposed by the mind. They include the principle of induction, and the more general principle that tells us to expect our experience to be governed by readily comprehensible laws. They are not imposed by the mind, and cannot be; yet they are indispensable even for our everyday knowledge of the world around us. If Kant is right about transcendental idealism, we have an a priori guarantee that, for example, there must be causal laws, but our constitutive principles do not tell us what these laws are: for that we have to rely on experience, and to interpret our experience we need constantly to rely on regulative principles, like the one that says we must regard the world as being readily comprehensible by us.<sup>19</sup> Equally, of

<sup>19</sup> *Critique of Judgement*, Introduction, sect. V, Ak. V: 181ff.; *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 642ff./B 670ff.

course, we must rely on such principles if Kant's transcendental idealism is *not* correct. Only so can we be warranted in extrapolating from the regularities *we* have observed, as we must do to build expectations about the future and even to judge which of our experiences represent objects and which illusions. That the world is genuinely comprehensible to us—that the regularities that strike us are, on the whole, the right ones—is not something we can read in. What we can be assured, however, is that to rely on such principles is rational. Thus we have no guarantee that grass will continue to be green tomorrow, because this depends on the character of our future experience and is not something we can read into the world, and unexpected changes are possible even in a world we know to be governed by an underlying principle of causal determinism; but we do know that we are justified in expecting it to be green, because it is rational to expect, when other things are equal, that the simple regularities we have observed will obtain generally throughout the world. Kant puts it by saying that reason requires us to regard the world *as if* it were designed by an intelligence like ours and were therefore comprehensible to us—but without entitling us to infer that it actually is so designed.

Although he does not bring it out very clearly, he is committed to the view that regulative principles allow us to draw certain limited conclusions about the world as it is in itself. One of these is just the conclusion that there *are* things in themselves: they are needed to provide a source for the unpredictable content of experience, because otherwise there would be no *explanation* for the given. And once this is granted, it becomes clear that even to predict that grass will be green tomorrow is to make an implicit claim about the underlying world of things in themselves. The constitutive principles that we read in cannot determine the colour of tomorrow's grass; we shall learn about it when the time comes through our senses, which depend for their material upon a manifold of intuition given from an independent source. Regulative principles can tell us that our present expectation is eminently rational or justified, but in telling us this they are at the same time, and inevitably, telling us that we are justified in drawing an inference about things as they are in themselves—the inference that they have whatever character is required to produce in us, through all the machinery of synthesis in perception that Kant describes, the appearance of green grass tomorrow. This is of course rather a useless piece of information, in that it does not tell us what things in themselves are *like*: we have

no way of working that out, because we have no way of working out how the synthetic capacities of the mind work upon the data of intuition to produce the appearances that they do. So one can see why Kant should say that we can have no knowledge of things as they are in themselves. Nevertheless, in putting it that way he is exaggerating a bit.

He is thus committed to regarding the regulative principles as objectively valid in the strongest sense: they are imperatives which hold independently of our (individual or collective) belief in them or our (individual or collective) attitude towards them. The laws of logic he regards in the same way, for he takes them to hold of things as they are in themselves—indeed he is committed to that by his commitment to a noumenal world, for otherwise his commitment to the reality of that world would not preclude its unreality. Those who reject transcendental idealism, and its picture of a world of appearances, ought to agree with him about the objectivity of these principles of inference. He calls them *a priori*, and would certainly reject the Humean suggestion that they are nothing more than habits of thought which come naturally to human beings. In the first *Critique* he makes an attempt to show that regulative principles are essential for every rational being with limited knowledge of the world; likewise in the *Grundlegung* he makes an attempt—rather an unsuccessful one—to show that the principles of morality are similarly essential for all rational beings, apparently claiming that every being capable even of theoretical reasoning must actually be motivated by them.<sup>20</sup> But even if arguments of this kind worked they would not give him what he wants, because showing that certain principles are inevitable for all rational beings is not the same as showing that they are objectively valid. It would only show how we, and other beings, must think, and for a principle to be objectively valid it must hold whether we think it to or not.<sup>21</sup> But once it is clear that this sort of argument will not do, two other things become clear as well. One is that no other sort of argument will do either. The other is that no sort of argument is after all needed. It is therefore not surprising to find that in the *Critique of Practical Reason* the *Grundlegung* argument does not reappear. Instead of arguing, as he did in the *Grundlegung*, that a commitment to rationality is a commitment to freedom, and that

<sup>20</sup> A 651/B 679; *Grundlegung*, Ak. IV: 446ff. = pp. 97ff.

<sup>21</sup> Thus Kant, in the preface to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak. V: 12f. = Abbott p. 98.

a commitment to freedom involves a commitment to morality, Kant just takes it as a basic fact that 'the moral law is given as a fact of pure reason, of which we are a priori conscious and which is apodeictically certain'.<sup>22</sup> Any attempt to show that all rational beings must be conscious of the law, or that they would be if they were to think through what they are inevitably committed to, has been given up.

Being objective, such principles cannot be established by any kind of investigation into who holds them. Being principles, their function is to determine what inferences or actions are justified, and if inferences or actions are justified at all it is by reference to principles such as these. The alternative remains open that perhaps our inferences and our actions cannot be justified at all, because the principles we use are nothing more than reflections of human habits of thought. This alternative remains open, and it must always remain open. The absolute scepticism which suggests that all our beliefs, all our arguments and all our justifications may fail to match reality, can never be answered, because it will never admit anything to count as an answer; it will never admit the validity of any principle of inference that an answer could use. But we do not let this worry us, nor do we take it very seriously. It is certainly true that the principles of deductive and inductive inference are different, and that the one cannot be reduced to the other; nor can the principles of morality be reduced to either of them. That leaves open the possibility of a scepticism which accepts the objective validity of one or of two of these, and rejects the other as no more than a habit of human thought. But the cases are parallel. In each case we find ourselves faced with an imperative, which presents itself to us as objective. And if we can accept this in one kind of case we can accept it in the others.

It may be said that our confidence in the principles of theoretical reasoning is well-founded because these principles reflect human habits of thought, but habits of thought which have evolved in us because they generally lead us to the truth; and that no parallel argument can be given in the moral case. But as various writers have observed, and particularly Nagel,<sup>23</sup> it is hard to see how evolution could explain our propensity to follow the principles of logic and scientific method in the absolutely

<sup>22</sup> *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak. V: 47=Abbott p. 136.

<sup>23</sup> T. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 78ff.

general way we do, drawing conclusions in astronomy and sub-atomic physics which are of a kind far removed from anything that could have enabled our ancestors to survive. And more importantly, what matters is not whether we could have come by these principles by evolutionary means. What matters, since we are committed to them, is whether they can be *validated* by evolutionary means. They could be validated in that way only if our coming to hold them could be explained as due to their being objectively valid. No evolutionary account could do this by itself, because it would have been enough for our ancestors' survival if they had given the right results in a limited range of practical instances, all of them confined to time now past. (Besides which, such a validation—like any other—would inevitably make use of principles of the kind in question.)

To avoid absolute scepticism, then, we must accept the fundamental imperatives that present themselves to us as objective. This is the essence of Kant's case, and I think that he is right. The moral law, he considers, presents itself to us in that way: that it does so is an essential part of his case, which is why it was so important to establish that it is indeed something that the ordinary reflective person regards himself as committed to. It is worth noticing here the parallel between the structure of his case for the objectivity of the moral law, and the structure of his argument within the first *Critique* or within the *Prolegomena*. There he proceeded by first getting his reader to accept the a priori synthetic character of mathematics, and then using that acceptance in order to convince him of the synthetic a priori character of propositions like 'Every event has a cause'. In the second *Critique* he is similarly drawing on an acceptance of objective rational laws, as shown to be necessary by the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in order to remove the difficulties that are felt in according that status to morality. But one can accept the rightness of the strategy in the present case without any commitment as to its success with regard to synthetic a priori truth within the first *Critique*.

Much of the difficulty people feel over Kant's position arises from a worry about whether the idea of an objective imperative is coherent. I hope I have gone some way towards showing that it is. The worry appears not only in the moral context, but also in the recurrent and unsatisfiable demand for a justification of the principles of theoretical reasoning. There is a tendency to ask: what *is* it for a principle to *hold*, to hold objectively, regardless of what we think about it? and then to suppose the answer must

consist in the obtaining of some factual state of affairs. But how could it, and why should it have to? The answers that are offered do not look promising. For instance someone might suggest that inference of a particular form—say inductive inference, or inference to the best explanation—was objectively valid if it usually gave the right result, i.e. the result that corresponds with how things are in the world; but that will hardly do, since if we are considering the principle of inference itself and not human uses of it we have infinitely many successful and infinitely many unsuccessful uses to consider. A better answer would be that the form of inference is objectively valid if a typical use of it is *likely* to give the right result, but if one takes this for the description of some factual state of affairs it becomes very puzzling what state of affairs it can be. What needs to be recognized is just what Kant himself made so extremely clear in his discussion of the moral law, that what it is for a principle to be objectively valid requires no further analysis: it is objectively valid if it holds as an objective law. The moral law holds as an objective law to govern conduct; the regulative principles hold as objective laws to license inferences. One way of *putting* the fact that an inference is licensed by the inductive principle is by saying that its conclusion is probable or likely.

If to say that such principles are valid is to say that they are objective laws, and if we can follow Kant in getting rid of the peculiar idea that an objective law can only hold *in virtue of* something else which is not itself a law and lacks a law's intrinsic imperatival character, it becomes clear why the objectivity of the moral law has to be taken, not as the conclusion of the argument of his second *Critique*, but as its starting point. It becomes clear also why he is right to compare it with theoretical principles, and to regard his opponents as committed to a position which leaves no room for them either. The history of recent philosophy shows that he was right. The doubts that are raised about morality are doubts about an objective, rational imperative. These doubts can be removed by examining the slender basis on which they rest. They can be removed also by reflecting that reason in general, theoretical as well as practical, is a matter of recognizing what such imperatives require. It is not that it would be inconsistent to accept the principles of theoretical reasoning and reject those of morality; it would simply be—to borrow Mackie's word—queer.