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Logic-Based Therapy's Analytic of Practical Reason: How Kant's Categorical Imperatives Set Metarules for Regulating Clients' Emotional Reasoning

Abstract: Kant's "Analytic of Practical Reason" investigated the grounds of practical reasoning in a similar way his "Transcendental Analytic of Pure Reason" investigated the grounds of pure reason. Arguably, his work in the latter domain can be applied to Logic-Based Therapy (LBT), a form of philosophical counseling and psychotherapy that addresses client's practical reasoning embedded in clients' cognitive emotions. This paper investigates how three of Kant's formulations of the Categorical Imperative can provide the basis for rational metarules, to regulate the logico-linguistic structures of clients' emotional reasoning, by debunking the use of certain types of illocutionary force operators of speech acts in combination with certain types of modal operators inside the deductive networks of clients' emotional reasoning. This paper illustrates the application of the Kantian approach to a prototypical network of client practical reasoning often embedded in cognitive emotions such as depression and guilt.

Key words: Logic-based therapy, Categorical imperative, Emotional reasoning, Illocutionary force, Modal logic

Logic-Based Therapy (LBT) is a philosophical approach to counseling and psychotherapy that maintains that people emotionally and behaviorally upset themselves—experience depression, anxiety, guilt, anger, and other negative emotions—by deducing self-destructive conclusions from irrational speech acts they perform in the premises of their practical syllogism chains. LBT practitioners help their clients identify such networks of irrational, self-defeating, emotively valanced logico-linguistic activities referred to as "emotional reasoning." Practitioners then help their clients identify and perform more rational activities aimed at building "guiding virtues" that counteract and replace the former self-defeating activities.¹

¹ Cohen, E. D., 2022. *Cognitive-Behavior Interventions for Self-Defeating Thoughts: Helping Clients to Overcome the Tyranny of "I Can't."* London: Routledge.

One especially pervasive and problematic case of such destructive emotional reasoning is the activity of damning oneself or others. For example, a client may say, "I failed to engage my philosophy students—many of them do not do the readings or participate in class. Therefore, I am a complete failure." Often, such emotional reasoning stems from higher-order logico-linguistic activities, notably demanding perfection.² Thus, the client may tell themselves that they *must never* fail at anything of great importance to them such as their activities as a philosophy professor. For illustrative purposes, consider the following emotional reasoning network consisting of deductive inferences:

1. I must never fail at anything important to me like teaching philosophy.
2. Therefore, if I fail to engage my students in learning to do philosophy, then I am a failure.
3. I have failed to engage my students in learning to do philosophy.
4. Therefore, I am a failure.
5. If I am a failure, then I can't stand it.
6. Therefore, I can't stand it.

I have elsewhere introduced symbolism for what I have called "illocutionary force operators" ("I-F operators" for brevity) to make explicit the illocutionary forces of the associated speech acts performed in a logico-linguistic inferential structure such as the above one. I have used the lightning bolt, "⚡" as the generic symbol for an I-F operator and symbolize the specific force by using letters placed after it.³ Following are symbols that cover the speech acts discussed in this paper:

1. ⚡ *dd* = Demanding
2. ⚡ *dn* = Damning
 - ⚡ *s-dn* = self-damning
 - ⚡ *o-dn* = other-damning
3. ⚡ *-v-dv* = volitionally disavowing (denying capacity to cope)

² Cohen, E. D., 2022. *Cognitive-Behavior Interventions for Self-Defeating Thoughts: Helping Clients to Overcome the Tyranny of "I Can't."*, *ibid.*; Cohen, E. D., 2019. *Making Peace With Imperfection: Discover your Perfectionism Type, End the Cycle of Criticism, and Embrace Self-Acceptance*. Oakland, CA: Impact Press.

³ Cohen, E. D., 2026 (in press). "How to Identify, Interpret, and Represent Cognitive Emotions in Logic-Based Therapy." *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 46(2).

Modal operators such as possibility and necessity are also helpful in clarifying the structures of such emotional reasoning chains because emotions are often modal in nature. For example, the emotional reasoning grounding various types of anxiety involves possibility since its objects are always about future possibilities.⁴ To represent “necessity,” I here use the standard modal symbol, “□”.

When this symbolism is applied, the above practical inference chain looks like this:

1. $\neg dd \square$ (I do not fail at anything important to me like teaching philosophy)
2. $\therefore \square$ [If $\neg r$ (I fail to engage my students in learning to do philosophy), then $\neg s-dn$ (I am a failure)]
3. $\neg r$ (I have failed to engage my students in learning to do philosophy).
4. $\therefore \neg s-dn$ (I am a failure).
5. $\square$ [If $\neg s-dn$ (I am a failure) then $\neg v-dv$ (my perceived existential state)]
6. $\neg v-dv$ (my perceived existential state)

So represented, it is easier to flag each of the illocutionary acts as they operate in their respective premises/conclusions.

Utilizing Kripke’s “true in all possible worlds” interpretation of the necessity operator “□” in premise 1 (Parent, n.d.),⁵ the client demands ($\neg dd$) that it be true in all possible worlds (situations) that I do not fail at anything important like teaching philosophy. Notice how the illocutionary force operator ($\neg dd$) ranges over the necessity operator since it is out front.

In conclusion 2, the client, in turn, deduces a rule of self-damning from premise 1, according to which, in any possible situation, if I report ($\neg r$) my failing to engage my students in learning to do philosophy, then I am instructing myself to damn myself ($\neg s-dn$) by telling myself that I am a failure. Notice here, in contrast to premise 1, the necessity operator ranges over the entire rule, including its illocutionary force operators because it is out front.

In premise 3, the client then reports the antecedent condition of 2 to be true, namely that he has, indeed, failed to engage his students in learning to

⁴ Cohen, E. D., 2026 (in press). “How to Identify, Interpret, and Represent Cognitive Emotions in Logic-Based Therapy.”, *ibid*.

⁵ Parent, T., n.d. “Modal metaphysics.” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. [Accessed: 2026-6-2]. Available at: <https://iep.utm.edu/mod-meta/>

do philosophy. Accordingly, in 4, via *modus ponens* from premises 2 and 3, the client concludes with performing the act of damning himself as a failure.

In premise 5, the client then adds a further rule instructing themselves, in all possible situations, to disavow their willpower to cope with or tolerate ($\zeta v\text{-}dv$) their perceived existential situation (state of thinking of themselves as a failure) if they damn themselves ($\zeta s\text{-}dn$) as a failure. This means that the client has adopted a rule such that, if they damn themselves as a failure then they must also deny their capacity to cope with, or tolerate, the painful perception of themselves as a failure because of having failed their students. Note that the necessity operator ranges over the I-F operators in this rule because it is out front, thus universalizing the rule.

Hence, in conclusion 6, the client deduces conclusion 6 from 4 and 5, via *modus ponens*. That is, they disavow their volitional capacity to cope with, or tolerate, the painful perception of themselves as a failure.

Forms of Categorical Imperative as Metarules for Debunking Self-Defeating I-F Operators in Universal Rules in Clients' Emotional Reasoning

With the above understanding of the logico-linguistic structure of emotional reasoning, I will show how Kant's various formulations of his "Categorical Imperative" can work as metarules in LBT for exposing the infelicities in certain rules in clients' emotional reasoning that apply combinations of modal operators such as necessity and possibility, and illocutionary force operators such as demanding, damning, and capacity disavowing. By "infelicities" I mean essentially what J. L. Austin⁶ meant, namely, that these speech acts are self-defeating because they fail to satisfy certain necessary conditions for their performance.

Kant's Universalizability Formulation of the Categorical Imperative

Kant's universalizability formulation of the Categorical Imperative (UCI) states:

Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.⁷

⁶ Austin, J. L., 1975. *How to Do Things with Words* (2nd Ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁷ Kant, I., 2024a, AA 4:421. *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, transl. by Abbott, T. K. Project Gutenberg. [Accessed: 2026-6-2]. Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5682/pg5682-images.html>.

As applied to rules with a demanding (ζdd) illocutionary force operator (out front) ranging over a necessity modal operator, UCI provides a metarule for testing the rationality of universal demands such as in premise 1: $\zeta dd \square$ (I do not fail at anything important to me like teaching philosophy).

This rule is as follows:

UCI Metarule

Reject any demand that something be true in all possible worlds if the universal law being demanded is either (a) inconceivable (that is, self-contradictory) or (b) not rational to demand.

In the case of premise 1, while the demand it makes—that there be no possible worlds in which I fail at anything important to me like teaching philosophy—does not satisfy criterion (a), it does satisfy (b). That is, it is not reasonable. This is because human beings are, by their nature, imperfect fallible beings, and they will invariably fail at things important to them. Further, in a universe where human beings never failed at such things, there would be no opportunity to learn from one's mistakes, and no rational human being would care to inhabit such a universe. This would be a world in which our efforts, in always meeting with success, would give us nothing to strive for. We would thus lose the incentive to try, as our efforts would always be reciprocated with success. Hence, proclaiming that one was successful would mean nothing and everyone would laugh at someone who attempted to gain honor or approval from others due their success. Hence, Kant's UCI Metarule for testing the adequacy of demands would reject the perfectionistic demand made in premise 1 by exposing some of its major infelicities, i.e, self-defeating properties.

Kant's Respect for Persons Formulation of the Categorical Imperative

Kant's "Respect for Persons" formulation of the Categorical Imperative (RPCI), as is well-known, tells clients to "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only."⁸ This metarule can be used to take aim at the rule in premise 2: $\square$ [If ζr (I fail to engage my students in learning to do philosophy), then $\zeta s-dn$ (I am a failure)].

⁸ Kant, I., *ibid.*, AA 4:429.

Effectively, Kant's metarule as applied to speech acts, enjoins:

RPCI Metarule

Reject any universal rule that necessitates engaging in self-damning (or others-damning) if one falls short of perfection.

First, if a human being had to be perfect to have worth and dignity, none of us would ever have worth and dignity, for all humans fall short of perfection in one way or another.

Second, according to Kant, the worth and dignity of human beings, *as persons*, can neither be augmented or diminished by their utility.⁹ Such extrinsic properties, such as teaching students to do philosophy, may provide a valuable service that can help students to navigate their own lives by helping them to perform such activities as clarifying concepts, examining assumptions, and exploring the logical implications of ideas, and for this it should, arguably, be encouraged. However, whether one succeeds at accomplishing this goal will neither increase nor diminish one's worth as a human person because this value is intrinsic, and hence not a function of accomplishments that have extrinsic value.

This is because human beings are not objects. The value of an object is exhausted by its usefulness. We discard a pen when it runs out of ink. However, humans are not objects to be discarded when they cease to perform a particular function. Indeed, no reasonable person would accept treating persons as objects because this implies that they themselves would also be discarded (killed or put in the "trash") as soon as they stop performing an extrinsically valuable service or function. But no rational human being would be disposed to accept such a fate.

Further, if a human person were to damn themselves whenever they failed at something, they would betray their worth and dignity as rational beings. This is because part of being rational is being capable of learning from one's mistakes, thus increasing their opportunities to use their capacity for reason to enhance the world, such as in becoming a better philosophy teacher.

Indeed, as an antidote to self-damning (and others-damning), LBT defines the guiding virtue of self-respect as unconditional self-acceptance, and it defines others-respect as unconditional others acceptance.¹⁰ This resonates

⁹ Ibid., sec. 1.

¹⁰ Cohen, E. D., 2022. *Cognitive-Behavior Interventions for Self-Defeating Thoughts: Helping Clients to Overcome the Tyranny of "I Can't."*, *ibid.*

with the RPCI Metarule because, this rule effectively says to unconditionally accept oneself and others as loci of intrinsic worth and dignity and offers such unconditional acceptance of one's own and others' intrinsic worth and dignity as a goal to which to strive in this world.

Hence, according to LBT, whatever its philosophical grounds, self-respect involves unconditional self- and others-acceptance. For some, this may be because we are creatures who are self-aware. For others, it may be that we are children of God. However, like Kant, LBT rejects speech acts of self-damning and others damning as affronts to the intrinsic worth and dignity of human persons. Like Kant, too, it embraces, as its antidotal guiding virtue, respect for self and others, defined in terms of unconditional self/others acceptance, albeit fleshed out according to one's own normative philosophical view of human worth and dignity.

LBT hence appears to align with Kant's own idea of self-respect, which is a disposition to unconditionally accept our own and others' worth and dignity. For Kant, this virtue includes an intellectual feeling of reverence arising from our realization that we are subject to the "moral law," that is, the law which tells us to treat ourselves (and others) in accordance with our rational nature. It is this realization that we are *autonomous* beings, as distinct from heteronomous beings (mere objects), that gives birth to this sense of value and dignity. That is, unlike objects, which are entirely determined by external forces, we are *self-determining* beings whose capacity to reason gives us an internal moral compass (the "Moral Law" in terms of the Categorical Imperative), which guides us in building self-respect.

Kant's Autonomy Formulation of the Categorical Imperative

Kant states that,

if there is a categorical imperative (i.e., a law for the will of every rational being), it can only command that everything be done from maxims of one's will regarded as a will which could at the same time will that it should itself give universal laws.¹¹

And Kant also states,

The will is in every action a law to itself, only expresses the principle: To act on no other maxim than that which can also have as an object itself as a universal law. Now this is precisely the formula of the categorical imperative

¹¹ Kant, I., *ibid.*, AA 4:421.

and is the principle of morality, so that a free will and a will subject to moral laws are one and the same.¹²

Thus, according to Kant, such a “free will” that “gives universal law” acts out of respect for the Moral Law that says to universalize one’s maxim—not out of concern for personal interests, the welfare of others, cultural conformity, or even compassion for others. It is a will that does not allow itself to be manipulated by such external conditions, which would include failing to engage one’s students. So, the client who concludes that he *can’t stand* his existential circumstances is not free. This individual would be treating themselves as *heteronomous*, rather than as *autonomous*.

Hence, the derivative autonomy metarule (ACI) enjoins:

ACI Metarule

Reject any universal rule with a capacity disavowing speech act that treats oneself like a mere object by disavowing one’s capacity to determine one’s own will.

ACI can provide a useful tool in LBT to disqualify rules with capacity disavowing I-F operators, such as rule 5 in the given emotional reasoning sample:

□ [If $\neg$ s-dn (I am a failure) then $\neg$ v-dv (my perceived existential state)]

When the client concludes in 6 [$\neg$ v-dv (my perceived existential state)] that they “can’t” stand damning themselves as a failure, then they (probably) “won’t.” But when the client asks if they can make a universal law out of keeping oneself stuck in this self-destructive state of self-damning, wallowing in self-pity, they clearly see that no rational being would want this for themselves and that being autonomous and free means acting according to a maxim that one can will to be a universal law. In LBT this would involve adopting a philosophical maxim that allows the client to reframe the situation so that they can move on.

For example, the Stoics would admonish the client not to demand that they control what is outside their control, such as students’ willingness to do philosophy. A universe in which humans were always

¹² Ibid.

able to control other human's reactions is conceivable. Indeed, it is possible to use mind-control techniques to control human responses, turning every human being into a mere automaton. However, no rational human being would accept such a universal law because it would subtract the very core of what gives dignity to human existence—the capacity to make one's own rational choices.

So, in LBT, the stoically inclined client would remind themselves not to demand that they control their students' responses to their pedagogy, for this is not a demand that could be turned into a rationally acceptable universal law. The client is thus encouraged to relinquish such a demand by constructing counteractive emotional reasoning. For example:

Let my students proceed not by being automatons of my pedagogy but instead autonomous beings who follow their own lights. If they should, for whatever reason, fail to bask in the light of philosophical inquiry, then rejoice in that I live in a universe in which my students have free agency and the capacity to choose according to their rational judgment, even if they choose not to exercise it.

My students are not responsive to my attempts to engage them in doing philosophy.

Therefore, rejoice in that I live in a universe in which my students are, nevertheless, free agents, not mere automata, with the capacity for rational judgment.

In such a case, the client begins to work on the virtue of rational self-control through an uplifting Stoic maxim that militates against a universe in which there is no capacity for rational self-control and people are merely manipulated and controlled. The paradox here is that the client's reason for feeling disempowered—not being able to engage one's students in philosophy—becomes the very reason to accept one's freedom. Kant expresses a similar point when he says that free will is a postulate of morality, for without this assumption, talk about how people *ought* morally to act would be nonsense. The implication of denying freedom hence becomes the very basis for affirming it.¹³

¹³ Kant, I., 2024b. *The Critique of Practical Reason*, transl. by Abbott, T. K. Project Gutenberg E-book. [Accessed: 2026-6-2]. Available at: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5683/5683-h/5683-h.htm#link2H_4_0041.

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented an example of a type of emotional reasoning chain that is commonly identified in treating clients using logic-based therapy (LBT) for emotional problems, generated by universal rules containing self-defeating speech acts imbedded in this chain such as modes of demanding, damnation, and capacity disavowing. I have shown how the import of these rules can be clarified by representing illocutionary force (IF), using symbols to represent IF operators and modal operators of possibility and necessity, in their relation to each other.

In the light of the latter LBT “analytic of practical reason,” I have demonstrated how three expressions of Kant's Categorical Imperative can provide corresponding metarules (UCI, RPCI, and ACI) that can debunk the said rules in client's emotional reasoning. In this way, Kant's Categorical Imperatives can set metarules for regulating clients' emotional reasoning in logic-based therapy.

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