

The Categorical Imperative

Book Three of the Noumenal Realm Trilogy

Level I Philosophy Curriculum
Guidebook

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Noumenal Realm Trilogy

Volume 3

Categorical Imperative

The Noumenal Realm Trilogy is a set of three novels geared for middle school-age children. Although each novel stands alone, it is best to read them all, and in order. Readers do not need any prior training in philosophy to understand the trilogy. It is meant to be accessible and interesting to anyone who likes to think about deep questions. Readers familiar with the first six volumes of the Royal Fireworks philosophy curriculum will recognize a number of the philosophers and theories discussed, but the characters and the storyline are new.

The trilogy is a work of historical fiction that follows a handful of middle school students through a series of adventures with classic philosophers from the ancient and early modern periods. Its aim is to acquaint readers with the great minds that shaped Western civilization.

The trilogy as a whole focuses on the unconventional educational initiatives of an institution called the New Smithsonian Foundation, whose aim is to educate the children of America through virtual reality experiences instead of through the Smithsonian Institution's dusty museum artifacts. The Foundation selects Roslyn Hart, Jonah Ziv, and Brent Bentley, along with some other students, to participate in a program that teaches kids about the history of philosophy through virtual reality simulations. In *The Categorical Imperative*, Roslyn, Brent, and Jonah track down Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant in order to battle skepticism and prevent the New Smithsonian Foundation from being shut down. In the end, they learn that reality is more amazing than they ever dreamed.

The storyline of this volume focuses on the European Enlightenment. While bold thinkers questioned the laws of God, the laws of nature, and the laws of civil society, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's breakthrough concept of autonomy showed that humans should obey only their own laws. But can autonomy provide a new foundation for both science and morality, as Immanuel Kant insisted? The young heroes of this novel discover what it means to obey your own laws.

This companion book is called a "Guidebook" instead of a "Teacher Manual" in recognition of the fact that students at this level should be able to use it on their own. Of course, the story can be enjoyed without the Guidebook, but the Guidebook will help to bring home the philosophical content. It provides for each chapter a summary of the plot developments, a philosophical basis for the key concepts of the chapter, discussion questions, and suggestions for further exploration to extend the learning.

There are quotations from famous philosophers for each chapter. These quotations have been heavily edited for ease of reading and are not intended for scholarly reference. There is a list of sources at the end of this book for further reading.

Chapter 1

Summary

Roslyn Hart reports to the Smithsonian Castle with two other middle schoolers for a conference held by the New Smithsonian Foundation concerning the message in the brown envelope. Aaron Ronbon informs them that completing the mission outlined in the message may be the solution to the current “Catastrophe,” in which parts of the physical world, perhaps including Jonah Ziv, have disappeared.

Philosophical Basis: John Stuart Mill on the Problem of Other Minds

Have you ever felt alone? What if you actually are? What if this whole world is a video game, and you are the only player-character?

The idea that you are actually the only mind that exists is called *solipsism* (from the Latin stems *solus*, meaning only, and *ipse*, meaning self). This is a view that philosophers have been worried about since long before video games were invented. In the 1600s, Descartes examined this possibility through his evil genius thought experiment. He proposed the idea that someone powerful was creating the world as an illusion for us; if that is possible, then we cannot be certain of anything but our own minds.

It takes some time to come to terms with Descartes’s evil genius thought experiment. It means that this book you are holding in your hands may not be real. Take a moment to think about that. It’s a bit of a shock.

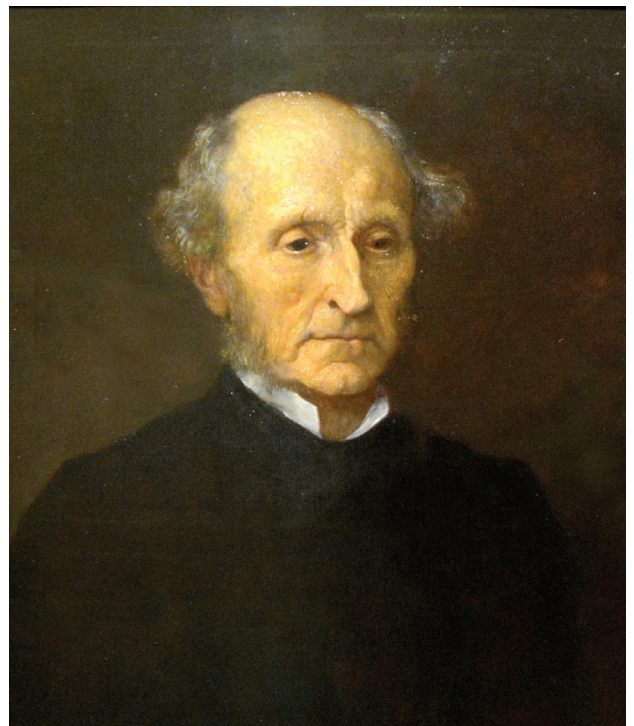
As you come to terms with it, however, you may decide that it doesn’t really matter. Whether the book is described as paper, or atoms, or energy, or a computer simulation, or a dream, or whatever, you are still experiencing it, and so it comes to the same thing. Many philosophers are content to concede that we are not truly certain about the physical source of our experiences, and they can live with that.

But one aspect of our experience that is not so easily resolved is our experience of other people. While it doesn’t really matter whether or not this book is some kind of illusion, it does matter whether or not the people you love are an illusion. When you interact with other people, you assume that they have minds like yours, with similar thoughts and feelings. The suggestion that they don’t is chilling. Philosophers call it the Problem of Other Minds.

The nineteenth-century English philosopher John Stuart Mill was among the first to grapple with the Problem of Other Minds. He wrote:

By what evidence do I know, or by what considerations am I led to believe, that there exist other sentient creatures? Do the walking and speaking figures that I see and hear have sensations and thoughts? In other words, do they possess minds?

Mill wasn’t sure whether or not God exists, so he couldn’t look to God for a guarantee that the people we know and love are really people. He was, however, impressed with the empiricist methodology championed by Aristotle and John Locke. Empiricists insist that we can gather reliable knowledge through sensory observations, even if they are never 100% certain. As Mill put it:



There is no such thing as absolute certainty, but there is assurance sufficient for the purposes of human life.

Observations alone are enough to help us when it comes to other minds, since we are questioning whether our observations are illusory. Mill introduced two useful argument strategies that can help empiricists supplement pure observation. The first is argument by analogy. An analogy is a comparison between two similar things. For example, you observe the following sequence of events concerning yourself:

1. You touch a candle flame.
2. You feel pain in your finger.
3. You cry out.

Then you observe the following sequence of events concerning your friend Joe:

1. He touches a candle flame.
2. ?
3. He cries out.

The sequence of events is the same for both of you, except that when Joe reaches step 2, you cannot observe his pain the way you observed your own pain. Yet you know that step 3 would not occur without Joe feeling pain. You infer by analogy that feeling pain is equally necessary for Joe. Therefore, he must have a conscious mind.

Analogies are often useful in reasoning about how the world works. If two things seem similar, then they probably work the same way. Yet analogy begins by assuming a similarity that we are not entitled to assume for the Problem of Other Minds. If Joe is a non-player-character in a video game, then he is not actually similar to you after all. When you assume exactly what you are trying to prove, you commit the fallacy known as “begging the question.”

Recognizing the limitations of analogy, Mill offered a second argument strategy, known as “Ockham’s Razor.” According to Ockham’s Razor, the simplest explanation is most likely to be true. You already know that step 3 is caused by feeling pain in your own case. Something completely different could be at work in the case of Joe, but you shouldn’t formulate an additional hypothesis unless you absolutely have to. Mill wrote:

The argument is exactly parallel to that by which Newton proved that the force which keeps the planets in their orbits is identical with that by which an apple falls to the ground. Newton did not need to prove the impossibility of its being any other force. He made his point when he had simply shown that no other force need be supposed.

Joe’s behavior can be explained by consciousness—something you already have reason to believe in, due to your own case. The simulation hypothesis, in contrast, is extra and unnecessary. (Unless, of course, you have received the message in the brown envelope!)

Discussion Questions

1. Why is Roslyn so sure she’s a player-character? Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. Roslyn says, “Nothing can really prepare you for the disappearance of the physical world.” But then she adds, “It didn’t *all* disappear. Actually, that would have been much easier to take.” Do you agree with her? Explain your answer.
3. Do you think that Roslyn’s feelings about the Disappearance Catastrophe would be different if Jonah was not among those who had disappeared? Why or why not?
4. Roslyn says that she wouldn’t want to be Jonah’s girlfriend if he was just part of the simulation. But how would she ever be able to know? Is there a way that she might be able to tell? Explain your answer.

5. Do you feel that life would be meaningless for you if you learned that you were the only player-character in a computer simulation? Why or why not?
6. Roslyn says that, “when it comes to life, I want the real thing.” How do you think she would know if it was real or not?

For Further Exploration

- Watch this video titled “What Is Consciousness?”: www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjfaoe847qQ
- Watch this video titled “Is Anything Real?”: www.youtube.com/watch?v=L45Q1_psDqk