

Yixuan Huang

Professor Yonghao Wang

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The status of the self-being in Kant's moral theory

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will delve into Kant's moral theory, focusing on the position and influence of self-being within this theoretical framework. First, I will provide a detailed explanation of Kant's moral theory to give the audience a theoretical foundation. Subsequently, I will conduct a thorough analysis of two examples—suicide and self-sacrifice—to dissect the moral status of self-being in these scenarios. The ensuing discussion will scrutinize the details of Kant's moral formulations, aiming to afford the audience a more holistic understanding of the ethical underpinnings of Kantian philosophy. Through this exposition, the paper aspires to guide the audience toward a profound comprehension of Kant's moral theory, illuminating the intricate role of self-being and inciting contemplation on pertinent aspects that merit further consideration and discourse within the expansive framework of Kantian ethics.

2. Kant's Ethics

The core concept of Kant's ethics revolves around the categorical imperative. According to Kant, the categorical imperative represents a command that applies unconditionally to all rational creatures without reference to any ends that these creatures might have. Kant argues that morality exists entirely within the rationality of individuals; therefore, only actions based on moral obligations possess moral value. Hence, acts of kindness arising from a good heart or

deeds performed out of duty, such as a soldier sacrificing in disaster relief, according to Kant, do not qualify as genuinely moral actions.

Kant asserts that morality should and can only be derived and deduced from the concept of law and rules. Specifically, Kant believes that ethical principles should originate from reason, and actions should be guided by reason rather than emotions or desires. The categorical imperative serves as a test standard for the moral permissibility of actions. Kant elucidates this concept in various ways, with the most famous formulations being the “formula of universal law formula” and the “formula of humanity”.

3. The Formula of Universal Law (FUL)

The Formula of Universal Law emphasizes the concept of universalizability within moral actions. According to Kant, an action is deemed morally permissible only if its underlying principle or maxim can be consistently applied universally. In other words, individuals ought to act in a manner that they would be willing to see everyone adopt without encountering logical contradictions. Kant contends that if a particular action cannot be universalized without generating inherent contradictions, it is morally impermissible.

The practical application of this principle depends on a pivotal question: can I envision the proposed action becoming a universal law? Kant further delves into this inquiry through two perspectives. First, individuals must consider if they can even conceive of the action being universally adopted; if not, it contradicts in conception. Second, individuals need to assess whether they can rationally will the action to become a universal law; if not, it contradicts in will. In Kant’s ethical framework, both types of contradictions render the action morally impermissible, thereby labeling it as immoral. For instance, lying is classified as an immoral

behavior within Kant's ethical perspective as living in a world where deceit is widespread is undesirable.

4. The Formula of Humanity

The Formula of Humanity, another key principle in Kantian ethics, underscores the significance of acknowledging the concept of humanity within the object of our actions. As Kant explains, we should not treat others as mere means for achieving our own goals (Neill 411). Instead, he advocates recognizing the inherent capacity of all rational beings to set their own ends and encourages a profound respect for this fundamental aspect of their humanity.

For example, consider the perspective of a company manager who embraces the individual goals and aspirations of each employee. Rather than regarding employees merely as instruments for fulfilling the company's objectives, this manager appreciates their rational capabilities in establishing personal and professional aspirations. Through fostering opportunities for professional growth, fostering open communication, and honoring employees' autonomy in decision-making, the manager affirms and values the humanity of the employees. In contrast, Kant posits that using others only as a means to one's own ends constitutes a failure to respect their humanity. For instance, borrowing money from others to address a personal financial shortage, without considering their inherent worth, violates the Formula of Humanity, reducing individuals to mere tools for resolving financial constraints.

5. Commit Suicide

Suppose a person feels hopeless about life because of a series of unfortunate events that have caused him to become tired of living. His principle is that it is the responsibility of the individual to take his own life and strive to live a better life. However, he believes that for him,

extending his life may bring more guilt than satisfaction. Therefore, out of self-love, he decides to fulfill his principle by shortening his life.

Examining this scenario through the Formula of Universal Law, we will find that if this person chooses suicide out of self-love to end a miserable life, then this self-love itself will also lead him to hope for life, thus forming a self-contradictory rule that cannot become a universal law. At the same time, even considering the act of suicide itself, it still cannot become a universal principle. If everyone in distress or pain chose to commit suicide, the whole society would be thrown into chaos because the value of life would no longer be regarded as a universally applicable principle. Escaping the pain of life by suicide is more a manifestation of an individual's subjective emotional domination than a decision based on reason and universal principles.

The Formula of Humanity provides a more direct and clear judgment. Since suicide is an escape from the pain of life, the act essentially regards humans as a means to escape pain, that is, in committing suicide, the individual does not regard humanity, including himself, as an end, but ignores humanity. Therefore, suicide also violates the Formula of Humanity. In summary, in Kant's moral theory, suicide is considered an immoral behavior.

6. Self-Sacrifice

Although Kant argues that the sacrifice of a soldier for relief cannot be considered a moral act because it is a virtue based on duty, we can still imagine an example of self-sacrifice to save others under Kant's fundamental conditions for moral action. When we examine such actions through Kant's two formulations, we find that this behavior can indeed pass the test.

For the Formula of Universal Law, first of all, such self-sacrifice is acceptable for the individual himself. For example, in a situation where a car is about to hit a child, people may

choose to risk their lives to save the child. After rational reflection, we find that this act of self-sacrifice will be approved in most cases by the majority. Moreover, this behavior can also be seen as a universal law, since the act of risking one's life to help others is widely considered moral in today's moral system. Self-sacrifice is therefore justified under the test of the Formula of Universal Law.

In helping others, especially on the premise of life danger, we show respect for human nature to others. This suggests that we do not treat others as mere instruments for our own ends, instead, we respect their human nature. Thus, according to Kant's moral theory, self-sacrifice can be considered as an act that meets moral requirements.

7. What are the differences between suicide and self-sacrifice

In the context of suicide, we can find that the subject and object of the act are the same person, while in the case of self-sacrifice, the subject and object of the act are two different individuals. Thus, although both examples involve the end of the life of the agent, we arrive at very different conclusions - suicide is regarded as immoral, while self-sacrifice is a moral act.

In Kant's moral theory, when judging the morality of an action, it is crucial to accurately define the doer of the action and the beneficiary of the action. This is particularly important for the Formula of Humanity. The Formula of Humanity emphasizes that we should not regard others as mere means, but also value their humanity. However, when the "other" in this formula refers to oneself, the situation becomes quite complicated. For example, in the context of suicide, some opponents may argue that suicide is not simply the purpose of suicide; on the contrary, they may argue that this behavior fully respects the will of the suicidal person, reflects the respect of the suicidal person for his own humanity, and therefore considers suicide as moral behavior.

Hence, considering the identity of the perpetrator and the beneficiary of the behavior can help us to judge the morality of a particular behavior more accurately when evaluating it.

8. Conclusion

In general, in this paper, I focus on the two examples of suicide and self-sacrifice, aiming to emphasize the important position of the existence of self-being in Kant's moral theory by analyzing and discussing the different results of these two examples in Kant's moral system. In the application and understanding of Kant's moral theory, we should carefully confirm the details that will help us better understand his theory and make further arguments for and against it.

Reference

O'Neill, Onora. "A simplified account of Kant's ethics." *Applied Ethics*. Routledge, 2017. 16-21.