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A Kantradiction

The goal of this paper is to show how Kant contradicts himself when laying out his formulations of The Supreme Principal of Morality. This paper is separated into four sections: I – an introduction to Kant and his principals (excluding the Formula of Autonomy because it is not pertinent to the contradiction), II – the contradiction that I find and illustrate using examples, III – how Kant would respond to my objection, IV – why Kant’s response is not strong.

I

Kant states three formulation of The Supreme Principal of Morality: Formula of Universal Law (FUL); Formula of Humanity (FH); and Formula of Autonomy (FA). Kant claims that the three formulations are not distinct principles but simply “different formulations of the very same law” (Kant 34). However, a closer analysis reveals that the FUL and FH evaluates moral actions in unique ways, and they do not always yield the same results.

To begin, lets define FUL. As Kant states, one must “act as though the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature” (Kant 24). This is illustrated with the example maxim, one lying about borrowing money he knows he will not return: if everyone lied about borrowing money, no one would lend money – defeating the original goal of borrowing money (Kant). From the FUL one can derive the idea of impartiality, that is if you

treat yourself (or others) as exceptions it tends to lead to contradiction and complications when universalized.

Next is FH. Here Kant states, “Act in such a way as to treat humanity, ... always as an end and never merely as a means” (Kant 29). This is to say one must always treat rational agents as an end and not simply to use them as a means. This is shown well in the same example as above. If one lies about borrowing money, they are simply using the one lending money as a means to their own end—violating FH. When actions become more nuanced, Kant relies on respect. An example of this is asking someone for directions; you are using them as a means to get your own goal. Kant explains why this is permissible by emphasizing that as long as you respect their ability to be a rational agent, you are not treating them “merely” as a means but also as an end. Respect is derived from the “merely” in the original definition, in that if you respect one’s ability to make a rational decision in your ends, you are no longer treating them as a mere means. FH puts a focus on respect and valuing people’s rights for their own sake.

II

Kant states clearly that these are “different formulations of the very same law” and that “one does better to go by just one of the three formulations...[specifically] act in accordance with a maxim that can at the same time make itself a universal law [FUL]” (Kant 34). By saying this Kant holds himself to saying each of the formulations produce the same results and that the FUL is the strongest of the formulations.

We now have our goal: give one example that would lead a rational agent into to two different conclusions based on two different formulations. Let’s continue with the example: *The Nazi Fanatic wanting to kill all Jewish people to achieve society without Jewish people.*

What would a rational agent following the FH say? We must ask, does the Nazi Fanatic action treat humanity as an end and not merely as a means? Very simply, the Nazi Fanatic does not—they do not respect the Jewish people’s rational agency in their own end. So, FH very clearly (and correctly) identifies a problem with the maxim.

What would a rational agent following the FUL test say? Well, this maxim when universalized would cause everyone to kill Jewish people even themselves. This maxim would not contradict itself because the goal would be achieved, a society without Jewish people (This will be further strengthened in section IV). This a problem, we have a disagreement between the two formulas and the FUL, the one Kant implores the reader to follow, is wrong.

Regardless, we have reached a contradiction; a rational agent can reach two different conclusions based on the different formulations. A major disagreement to Kant’s ideas of the Supreme Principal of Morality.

III

Kant might push back on the FUL. He might say the maxim we created did not capture the Nazi Fanatic’s true maxim, saying it is broader than what is presented. He might also say we did not correctly take into the effects when universalizing the maxim. But most importantly, that killing is always wrong even killing yourself—so we can never kill in a maxim.

IV

To start with the maxim itself. We choose the Nazi Fanatic because they believe in killing Jewish people for the simple sake of getting rid of all Jewish people. It is important to note that the Nazi Fanatic will kill themselves if they found out they were Jewish. Kant might try to argue that the maxim is too narrow and needs to be broader. Something close to *kill those who you*

believe is inferior to yourself. Which I agree has more push back when universalized, however the Nazi Fanatic does not care about whether the Jewish person is inferior to him or not, because if he himself were a Jewish person he would still kill himself and other Jewish people. So, we can continue with the same maxim.

The second is that there is problems with universalizing the maxim. Upon universalizing the maxim, all Jewish people would kill themselves once they become aware of the maxim and all other people will kill Jewish people under the same conditions. This does not give the chance for the Jewish people to hide their identity from society because once they are knowledgeable about the maxim they would kill themselves. And even if some Jewish people were not in society to begin with so they never become aware of the maxim, they are not a problem because they do not conflict with the original maxim of removing all Jewish people from Society. So, the maxim seems to hold when universalized.

Kant makes clear that any maxim involving killing cannot be morally permissible because it fundamentally violates the supreme principle of morality. He states, “a man is not a thing, so he isn’t something to be used merely as a means and must always be regarded in all his actions as an end in himself” (Kant 29). Killing a person treats them purely as a means to an end, stripping them of their intrinsic worth as rational beings. Kant further asserts, “I can’t dispose of a man by maiming, damaging or killing him—and that includes the case where the man is myself” (Kant 29). Thus, any maxim that universalizes killing would inherently contradict the duty to respect humanity as an end in itself, making it impermissible according to the Formula of Humanity and the Formula of Universal Law.

This is a major problem to the Nazi Fanatic and his maxim which relies heavily on killing people. However, if we change the specific language from killing to relocating Jewish people out

of society we get a new maxim: *The Nazi Fanatic wanting to relocate all Jewish people to achieve society without Jewish people*. Because this maxim is similar to the original maxim it follows most the preceding arguments. It fails FH because it does not give Jewish people rational agency in being a part of society or not, although it passed FUL because it can be universalized while still achieving the same goal. Importantly, however, there is no killing involved, so Kant's strongest pushback is invalid with this new maxim.

Although not the original maxim, the new maxim creates a serious problem. It creates two separate conclusions on two different formulas which Kant stated clearly describes the same law. And should never have two different outcomes which would violate the Supreme Principal of Morality. Finally, we have reached where Kant contradicts himself.