

Philosophical Writing

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October 3, 2021

The literature on Kantian ethics is expansive and complicated. To focus my thesis on the contributions of automated ethics to Kantian thought, I make the following choices.

Choice to Formalize the FUL

I am only studying formalizations of Kant’s first formulation of the categorical imperative, the formula of universal law (FUL), because it is the most formal and thus the easiest to formalize and implement. Onora O’Neill [8]¹ explains that the formalism of the FUL allows for greater precision in philosophical arguments analyzing its implications and power. This precision is particularly useful in a computational context because any formalism necessarily makes its content precise. The FUL’s existing precision reduces ambiguity, allowing me to remain faithful to Kant’s writing and philosophical interpretations of it. Precision reduces the need to make choices to resolve debates and ambiguities. Some of these choices may be well-studied and grounded in literature, but some may be unique to formalizing the FUL and thus understudied. Minimizing these choices minimizes arbitrariness in my formalization and puts it on solid philosophical footing. Given that this thesis is a proof-of-concept, the formalism of the FUL is attractive because it reduces both the computational and philosophical complexity of my work.

While some criticize the FUL for its formalism and perceived “sterility” [8], Kantian constructivists embrace it. My project is not committed to Kantian constructivism; I argue that computational ethics is a valuable tool for any ethicist, with a focus on general Kantian ethics. Nonetheless, Kantian constructivists may find the focus on the FUL particularly appealing.

Though Kantians study all formulations of the categorical imperative, Kant argues in *Groundwork* that the three formulations of the categorical imperative are equivalent [6]. While this argument is disputed [5], for those who believe it, the stakes for my choice of the FUL are greatly reduced. If all formulations are equivalent, then a formalization of the FUL lends the exact same power as a formalization of the second or third formulation of the categorical imperative. In fact, future work could formalize the other formulas and try to prove that they are identical. Kant believes that his argument for the equality of the formulas is analytical, and if he is correct, it should be possible to recreate the argument in logic.

Definition of a Maxim

I define a maxim as a circumstance, act, goal tuple (C, A, G) , read as “In circumstances C , act A for goal G .” Isabelle’s strict typing rules mean that the choice of the type of each member of this tuple is significant. A circumstance is represented as a set of worlds t where that circumstance holds. A goal is also a term because it can be true or false at a world if it is realized or not. An act is an open sentence because an act itself is not the kind of thing that can be true or false (as in, an act is not truth-apt), but the combination of a subject performing an act can be true or false at a world depending on whether or not the act is indeed performed by that

¹p. 33

subject. For example, “running” is not truth-apt, but “Sara runs” is truth-apt.

My definition of a maxim is inspired by Onora O’Neill’s work on maxims. I will defend my representation below and consider an additional component that Patricia Kitcher argues for.

O’Neill’s Original Schematic and The Role of Practical Judgement

O’Neill² [8] presents what Kitcher [7] calls the widely accepted view that a maxim is a circumstance, act, goal tuple. A maxim is an action-guiding rule and thus naturally includes an act and the circumstances under which it should be performed, which are often referred to as “morally relevant circumstances.”

She also includes a purpose, end, or goal in the maxim because Kant includes this in many of his example maxims and because Kant argues that human activity, because it is guided by a rational will, is inherently purposive[6]³. A rational will does not act randomly (else it would not be rational), but instead in the pursuit of ends which it deems valuable. This inclusion is also essential for the version of the universalizability test that I will implement, explained in Section ??.

O’Neill’s inclusion of circumstances is potentially controversial because it leaves open the question of what qualifies as a relevant circumstance for a particular maxim. This gives rise to “the tailoring objection” [7]⁴, under which maxims are arbitrarily specified to pass the FUL. For example, the maxim “When my name is Lavanya Singh, I will lie to get some easy money,” is universalizable, but is clearly a false positive. One solution to this problem is to argue that the circumstance “When my name is Lavanya Singh” is not morally relevant to the act and goal. This solution requires some discussion of what qualifies as a relevant circumstance.

O’Neill seems to acknowledge the difficulty of determining relevant circumstances when she concedes that a maxim cannot include all of the infinitely many circumstances in which the agent may perform the action⁵. She argues that this is an artifact of the fact that maxims are rules of practical reason, the kind of reason that helps us decide what to do and how to do it [1]. Like any practical rule, maxims require the exercise of practical judgement to determine in which circumstances they should be applied. This judgement, applied in both choosing when to exercise the maxim and in the formulation of the maxim itself, is what determines the “morally relevant circumstances.”

The upshot for computational ethics is that the computer cannot perform all ethical activity alone. Human judgement and the exercise of practical reason are essential to both formulate maxims and determine when the actual conditions of life coincide with the circumstances in which the maxim is relevant. Choosing when to exercise a maxim is less relevant to my project because analyzing a formal representation

²p. 37

³(G 4:428)

⁴Kitcher on p.217 cites Wood p. 102 [10] as offering an example of a false positive due to this objection.

⁵p. 37

of the FUL requires making the circumstances in a given scenario precise, but will be important for applications of computational ethics to guiding AI agents. The difficulty in formulating a maxim, on the other hand, demonstrates the important fact that ethics, as presented here, is not a solely computational activity. A human being must create a representation for the dilemma they wish to test, effectively translating a complex, real situation into a flat logical structure. This parallels the challenge that programmers face when translating the complexity of reality to a programming language or computational representation. Not only will some of the situation's complexity inevitably be lost, the outcome of the universalizability test will depend on how the human formulates the maxim and whether or not this formulation does indeed include morally relevant circumstances. If the human puts garbage into the test, the test will return garbage out.

While this may appear to be a weakness of my system, I believe that it actually allows my system to retain some of the human complexity that many philosophers agree cannot be automated away.⁶ Ethics is a fundamentally human activity. Kant argues that the categorical imperative is a statement about the properties of rational wills. In fact, Korsgaard argues that morality derives its authority over us, or normativity, only because it is a property of a rational will, and we, as human beings, are rational wills. If ethics is meant to guide human behavior, the role of the computer becomes clear as not a replacement for our will, but instead as a tool to help guide our wills and reason more efficiently and more effectively. Just as calculators don't render mathematicians obsolete, computational ethics does not render human judgement or philosophy obsolete. Chapter 4 Section ?? will be devoted to a more complete discussion of this issue.

Exclusion of Motive

Kitcher [7] begins with O'Neill's circumstance, act, goal view and expands it to include the motive behind performing the maxim. This additional component is read as "In circumstance C, I will do A in order to G because of M," where M may be "duty" or "self-love." Kitcher argues that the inclusion of motive is necessary for the fullest, most general form of a maxim in order to capture Kant's idea that an action derives its moral worth from being done for the sake of duty itself. Under this view, the FUL would obligate maxims of the form "In circumstance C, I will do A in order to G because I can will that I and everyone else simultaneously will do A in order to G in circumstance C." In other words, if Kant is correct in arguing that moral actions must be done from the motive of duty, the affirmative result of the FUL becomes the motive for a moral action.

While Kitcher's conception of a maxim captures Kant's idea of acting for duty's own sake, I will not implement it because it is not necessary for putting maxims through the FUL. Indeed, Kitcher acknowledges that O'Neill's formulation suffices for the universalizability test, but is not the general notion of a maxim. In order to pass the maxim through the FUL, it suffices to know the circumstance,

⁶Powers [9] presents the determination of morally relevant circumstances as an obstacle to the automation of Kantian ethics.

act, and goal. The FUL derives the motive that Kitcher bundles into the maxim, so automating the FUL does not require including a motive. The “input” to the FUL is the circumstance, act, goal pair. My project takes this input and returns the motivation that the dutiful, moral agent would adopt. Additionally, doing justice to the rich notion of motive requires modelling the operation of practical reason itself, which is outside the scope of this project. My work focuses on the universalizability test, but future work that models the process of practical reason may use my implementation of the FUL as a “library.” Combined with a logic of practical reason, an implementation of the FUL can move from evaluating a maxim to evaluating an agent’s behavior, since that’s when “acting from duty” starts to matter.

Practical Contradiction Interpretation

Kantians debate the correct interpretation of the formula of universal law because Kant, at times, appears to interpret the universalizability test in different ways. My project uses Korsgaard’s practical contradiction interpretation, broadly accepted as correct within the philosophical community [3]⁷. Below, I briefly reconstruct Korsgaard’s argument for the practical contradiction interpretation. While she believes that the text partially supports this interpretation, her argument is philosophical and derives its strength from the plausibility of the practical contradiction interpretation.

Recall that the formula of universal law is “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” [6]⁸. To determine if a maxim can be willed as a universal law, one must use the “universalizability test,” which requires imagining a world in which everyone for all of time has willed the maxim. If willing the maxim in such a world generates a contradiction, then the action is prohibited. There are three interpretations of what sort of contradiction is necessary: (1) the teleological view, prohibiting actions that conflict with some assumed teleological end when universalized, (2) the logical contradiction view, prohibiting maxims that are logically impossible when universalized, and (3) the practical contradiction view, prohibiting maxims that are self-defeating when universalized.

Under the logical contradiction interpretation, falsely promising to repay a loan to get some quick cash fails the universalizability test because, in such a world, the practice of promising would die out so making a false promise would be impossible. Korsgaard appeals to Dietrichson [2] to construct the example of a mother killing her children that tend to cry more than average so that she can get some sleep at night. Universalizing this maxim does not generate a logical contradiction, but it is clearly morally wrong. The problem here is that killing is a natural action, which Korsgaard distinguishes from a practice, like promising. Natural actions will never be logically impossible, so the logical contradiction view fails to prohibit them.

⁷p. 177

⁸(G: 4:421)

Under the teleological contradiction interpretation, a maxim is prohibited if it undercuts some natural or assigned purpose for some practice, act, or object. For example, the purpose of promising is to create a system of mutual trust and false promising undercuts this purpose and is thus prohibited. The problem with this view is that it assumes that the agent is committed, either because of their own goals or because of some property of a rational will, to some teleological system. Acton formulates Hegel's argument that [4], an agent doesn't have to be committed to promising as a system of mutual trust. Korsgaard concludes that assigning teleological purposes to actions is difficult because "such purposes may have nothing to do with what the agent wants or ought rationally to want, or even with what any human being wants." If the agent is not committed to the purpose, then will not see a contradiction in willing an act that violates this purpose.

This difficulty with the teleological contradiction interpretation drives Korsgaard to look for purposes that an agent must necessarily be committed to, and she concludes that this must be the purpose of the maxim itself. By willing a maxim, an agent commits themselves to the goal of the maxim, and thus cannot rationally will a system in which this goal is undercut. This system satisfactorily handles natural actions like those of the sleep-deprived mother: in willing the end of sleeping through the night, she is implicitly willing that she be alive in order to secure and enjoy her sleep. If any mother is allowed to kill any loud child, then she cannot be secure in the possession of her life, because her own mother may have grown frustrated with her crying. Her willing this maxim thwarts the end that she sought to secure.

The practical contradiction interpretation not only addresses the problems with the first two interpretations, it also offers a much more satisfying explanation of why certain maxims are immoral. The problem is not the existence of a contradiction itself, but instead the fact that these maxims involve parasitic behavior on social conditions that the agent seeks to benefit from. The false promiser simultaneously wants to abuse the system of promising and benefit from it, and is thus making an exception of themselves. It is this kind of free-riding that the universalizability test seeks to draw out. The test raises the same kinds of objections that the question "What if everyone did that?" seeks to draw out.

References

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