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RGS6036.E1
EXERCISE 2.6

Kant's Formalism Theory

Immanuel Kant's Formalism Theory is an ethical theory that recommends
decisions be made based on generally accepted rules that everyone else also
uses. Formalism Theory is based on categorical imperative, which holds that
individuals must make decisions and act based on universal principles, or
maxims. Each person should comply with these universal principles.
Individuals should realize that their own unique goals are negated by the
more important idea of obeying these maxims. In order to know that these
principles are viable for everyone, it is necessary to determine the level of
possibility and acceptance by all individuals. To determine the level of
possibility of a maxim, an individual should question how consistent the
maxim is for everyone. An inconsistent maxim means that an individual should
avoid acting on it. For example, a principle might be along the lines of:
All drivers should be courteous to one another. In reality, this maxim is
inconsistent, as it relies on drivers to be in control emotionally and
physically at all times. Unfortunately, many people drive when they are
tired, angry, depressed, or unfocused. Driving is such a habit that
individuals think of it as automatic. People experience "road rage" if other
drivers get in their way or they get stuck in rush hour traffic. Courteous
driving is more appropriately termed as defensive driving. This concept
cannot be universally applied, and drivers are recommended to avoid
troublesome drivers. After determining the possibility of the principle, it
must be accepted by people universally. Unfortunately, several maxims cannot
be accepted by everyone. An example of a principle being unacceptable to
people would be: Negotiate only when you can get everything that you want.
In reality, if individuals refused to negotiate and compromise on issues,
then very few agreements would be reached. Oftentimes, people have to give

up something in order to get something else. In these terms, it is difficult to have universal principles.

To put Kant's Formalism Theory in perspective, it helps to individually analyze the main components of the theory. The two main components of the theory are consistency and acceptability. According to Kant, individuals should only act on a decision if it is based on a principle that is universally accepted by all. It is generally difficult to convince all parties to agree on a decision, or in other words, accept that it is moral. For instance, the United States government decided to initiate conflict against Iraq in 2003, because, among other reasons, they were under the impression that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. People in support of the United States accepted that it was right for the U.S. government to invade Iraq. They also accepted that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. Other people did not accept that it was the U.S. government's responsibility to invade Iraq, and many people also did not accept that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. In the United Nations, it was controversial for the U.S. to invade Iraq, with only a few allies offering support. Based on the conflicting opinions, Kant's Formalism Theory holds that the United States should have avoided the accusation and invasion of Iraq.

The other main component of Formalism Theory holds that a maxim must be consistent if it is to hold true. An example of a maxim that does not hold true would be: All criminals will commit crimes again after they are out of prison. If such a maxim consistent, then criminals would be in prison for life. To allow a criminal out of prison knowing that they will cause more crimes would be reprehensible. The idea is that they spend enough time in prison to realize the error of their ways. According to Formalism Theory, this maxim is inconsistent with reality. Some people leave prison and avoid criminal activity afterward.

Among the Warner case studies, Case #13 discusses cloning, an activity that has been hotly debated and is a prime candidate for consideration using Immanuel Kant's Formalism Theory. The debate is over whether humans should be creating life through the cloning process. Some people argue that it is not man's place to do God's job. Other people argue that cloning could be used to save lives. The potential dangers of cloning are frightening, if it is manipulated by evildoers. Using Formalism Theory, the idea of human cloning can be tested. Consider this maxim: Human cloning will only be used by parents who want to dictate the physical traits of their children. This statements is inconsistent, because there will still be couples who want their children to be developed naturally. To test acceptability of a maxim, consider this: Human cloning will only be used to create a super race of people. This maxim does not pass the acceptability test, as it does not take into account that cloning could be used to combat diseases.

Case #9 of the Warner case studies presents Melinda's Dilemma, which can be discussed within the framework of Formalism Theory. To summarize, Melinda was fired for violating the company's policy of abandoning her job in the middle of the workday. Melinda had asked for approval to leave work to attend a school meeting, the nature of which was not revealed. Her supervisor denied her request to leave work early, reasoning that other people could be allowed to leave for the same reason if Melinda were allowed to leave. The supervisor is operating under the maxim that because Melinda wanted to attend a school meeting, other employees would want to attend school meetings as well. Such reasoning is inconsistent in that other employees may not want to leave work, while others may need to leave work for other serious reasons. The supervisor is also operating under the maxim that employees will begin to leave their posts for false reasons. This reasoning is not acceptable, because not all employees will be dishonest.

Kant's Formalism Theory limits individuals' abilities to make decisions, as it requires universal consent among many people. Since such a requirement is very difficult to obtain, Formalism Theory, as a framework for ethical decision-making, is flawed in comparison to other ethical theories. Deontological theory and teleological theory both allow an individual to make decisions without knowing that the principles have been consented to by all. With deontological theory and teleological theory, individuals can go through the decision-making process based on their own thoughts and considerations. They might gather input from others, but the theories do not require it. Compared with Formalism Theory, teleological theory and deontological theories are more realistic for decision-making.

Formalism Theory contrasts with ethical egoism in that the latter focuses more on individuals while the former involves decision-making according to universal maxims. With ethical egoism, individuals do not necessarily have to consider universal principles. They can make the decision that is in their own best interest and consider that to the most ethical outcome. Ethical egoism violates formalism theory, because it allows for inconsistencies and allows for unacceptability.

References

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      Case Studies. 5th ed. 1984.

Frankena, William K. Ethics. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973.