

Immanuel Kant and the First Categorical Imperative

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 12 February 1804) is sometimes described as the greatest, “modern” philosopher

Besides doing original work in physics, he is most famous for his “critical philosophy”

This philosophy attempts to set the limits of human reason in knowing the world

It also attempts to determine the necessary conditions for morality



Kant himself led a very constant, predictable life

He never married, and devoted all his time to philosophical research and teaching

1

Distinguishing a utilitarian from a common, non-utilitarian approach to paying taxes

Should I pay my taxes (Utilitarian approach)

- a. **Yes**, because it is likely to become common knowledge that people are not paying all of their taxes, and this will provoke other people to cheat. In consequence, the government will go bankrupt and not be able to provide the many services we need, such as policing, defence, health, education, environmental protection, food safety, roads, etc.
- b. **No**, because the amount of money I plan not to pay is insignificant to the government and the use I will make of that money will more than offset the economic loss caused by me not paying. Further, since I am a discreet person, no one is likely to find out; so the practice won't spread

How would the utilitarian decide which is correct?

2

Should I pay my taxes (non-Utilitarian approach)

Yes, because if everyone were to cheat on their taxes, the government will go bankrupt and not be able to provide the many services we need, such as policing, defence, health, education, environmental protection, food safety, roads, etc. You surely wouldn't want others to do what you are thinking of doing, and that means you shouldn't cheat on your taxes

The *feature of the act itself* that makes not paying taxes wrong is that "If you wouldn't want everyone else to act in that way, neither should you" (76)

What if everyone did that? (e.g. ...)

Kant's "supreme principle of morality," the "categorical imperative"

Key version: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also *will* that my *maxim* should become a *universal law*." (76)

Maxim: the general principle by which a person acts in a given circumstance

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For example suppose I try to borrow money from a friend, even though I know I can't pay it back

The maxim of my action might be: "Whenever I need money and can get it by borrowing it, then I will borrow it, even if I know I won't be able to repay it." (77)

Maxims must describe general types of situations, rather than a specific one

How general is unclear (to me)

Kant says that every specific action (*act-token*) has a maxim (rule expressing *act-type*)

Caution: not every piece of *behaviour* is an *action* (behaviour based on an implicit or explicit thought):

e.g. suppose I am easily startled, so that whenever I hear a sudden, loud noise, I jump; there is no corresponding maxim for this behaviour: "When I hear a loud noise, I will jump"

The maxim of an action may falsely represent the situation in which the agent finds themselves

My maxim might be: Whenever people are rude to me, I will deliberately turn away and ignore them.

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A colorful illustration of a young girl and a young boy running towards the viewer. The girl on the left has blonde hair and is wearing a pink and white checkered dress with puffed sleeves. The boy on the right has brown hair and is wearing a light blue short-sleeved shirt and tan shorts. Both children are smiling and appear to be in motion, with their arms and legs swinging. The background is a plain, light color.

e.g. On different occasions, Jane helps Granny across the street & Dick helps Granny across the street.

Jane's maxim: When I can get money by nice behaviour, I will perform nice behaviour.

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Physical (nomological) necessity: How the world of physical objects must behave (in certain circumstances)

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Logical necessity

e.g. the law of excluded middle: it is impossible for a statement and its negation both to be true

Universal law of freedom: “a universal principle describing how all people ought to act in a certain circumstance” (79)

E.g. You **must** always pay your debts.

Here the must is a “moral necessity”

Kant describes his categorical imperative variously as a universal law of nature and a universal law of freedom

WILLING

Inconsistent willing: willing the impossible

1. The will “contradicting itself”: willing something that cannot exist: e.g. making a round square.

Clapping with one hand?

2. Willing two different things at the same time, though each is separately possible, cannot co-exist

willing that I run up the stairs; maintaining this will, while also now willing that I run back down the stairs

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Generally, “a person wills inconsistently if [they will] that p be the case and [they will] that q be the case and it is impossible for p and q to be the case together” (80)

THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

CI_1 : An act is morally right if and only if the agent of the act can consistently will that the generalized form of the maxim of the act be a law of nature.

The CI vs. the “Golden Rule”

GR: “An act is morally right if and only if, in performing it, the agent refrains from treating others in ways in which [they] would not want the others to treat [them].” (81)

Kant argues that the GR is incomplete because it doesn’t:

- (i) tell us how to treat ourselves
- (ii) condemn those who refuse to help others, granting that they would accept others doing the same; and
- (iii) give any guidance on how to evaluate sadistic masochists.

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Generalized Maxim: “Whenever anyone needs money and can get some by borrowing it on a false promise, then [they] will borrow the money and promise to repay, even though [they know that they] won’t be able to repay” (84)

Kant argues that this maxim cannot be a law of nature, since if everyone were to break their promises whenever it suited them, there wouldn't actually be any promises to break—this “maxim, as soon as as it was made a universal law, would be bound to annul itself” (85)

For this maxim entails that not only would no one every truly make a promise, one would also never reasonably believe any “promises” and so would not take them to be promises

Not a utilitarian argument: According to U_7 , one should (usually) not break promises, since people would soon stop trusting each other, and could thus no longer be involved in the sorts of complex enterprises requiring the trust of many people

The external consequence of breaking promises would be much less wealth and happiness

By contrast, Kant argues that the *internal logic* of promising makes it impossible that everyone break their promises

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Odd critique: All Kant has shown is that the maxim associated with a particular act of promise-breaking cannot be universalized

Kant hasn't shown that every act of breaking a promise has a maxim that can't be universalized

Are there some cases of promise-breaking where the maxim could be universalized?

The Categorical Imperative and Neglecting Natural Talents: It is wrong to let all of one's natural talents go unused

An imperfect duty, since one cannot possibly develop all of one's potential talents

As with the suicide case, Kant is arguing that, just as we have a natural self-love that drives us to preserve our lives, so too, we have a natural urge to develop our capacities, since they serve us in our self-love.

The maxim of a lazy, talent-ruster: Whenever a person is comfortable with their current state, they will let their talents rust

So our primary will to develop our talents is contradicted by the will expressed in this maxim

Do we all necessarily will that at least some of our talents be developed?

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The Categorical Imperative and Giving to Charity: We cannot consistently will to refuse to help others

The well-off person who refuses to help others, and who says that they would also refuse help when down and out wills a contradiction

“For a will which decided in this way would be in conflict with itself, since many a situation might arise in which the man needed love and sympathy from others, and in which, by such a law of nature sprung from his own will, he would rob himself of all hope of the help he wants for himself” (88)

Maxim?

Feldman counters that this argument won't work, since

- (i) the possibility of needing others' help doesn't mean that day will actually come; and
- (ii) the agent may **reasonably** refuse help should that day arise

Do these objections work?

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Feldman argues that:

- (i) the CI allows maxims to be easily tweaked to permit clearly unethical actions, and
- (ii) the CI also naturally forbids clearly permissible activities
- (i) **The case of the cheating student:** the lazy student buys a paper from a high-quality “paper mill”

She knows that she won't get caught, and that this will allow her to get a very high mark

Her maxim: “Whenever anyone needs a term paper for a course and doesn’t feel like writing one, [they] will buy one and submit it as [their] own work

This maxim doesn't seem consistently will-able

After all, if each student did this, the systematic high quality of the papers would convince instructors that massive cheating was occurring and would put in measures to thwart it

Or (better) if every student were to do this, the standards by which papers are evaluated would shift, and such papers would no longer be deemed of very high quality and so, would not merit a high grade

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However, suppose the student phrases the maxim of her action as follows:

“When I need a term paper for a course, and I don’t feel like writing one, and no change in the system will occur if I submit a store-bought one [or, evaluative standards would not change] then I shall buy a term paper and submit it as my own work” (89)

Is this dodge allowed by Kant’s approach?

Why or why not?

(ii) **The case of the bank withdrawal:** a person decides to remove their money from the bank, when the Dow Jones index reaches 13,500

Generalized maxim? Whenever the DJ Index reaches 13,500, everyone shall withdraw their money from the bank

While no one could consistently will this, it seems perfectly moral for any individual to do this

Suppose I don’t want to become a doctor? What is the maxim of my proposed action?

Could this be universalized?

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Suppose I want to use birth control?

Maxim?

Universalizable?

DISCUSSION TOPIC

NEXT WEEK

Ch. 9: Kant II

Ch. 10: Rodriguez v British Columbia

- Paul Edwards defends suicide on Kantian grounds

The Suicide Tourist (YouTube video)

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