

“I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law.” What does Kant mean by this, and does it give the right kind of guidance when we are choosing our maxims?

Introduction

In this essay, I will first outline my understanding of the basis for Kant's categorical imperative, then go on to list some apparent problems and explain how these might be answered, concluding with some thoughts on the implications of choosing maxims based on Kant's formulation.

The extracts from Kant's writings are taken from "Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals", translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott.

Kant's Moral Theory

Many moral philosophies seem, in one way or another, to be different ways of articulating the 'golden rule', - 'treat others as you would have them treat you', and it sometimes seems as if this golden rule is taken to be a premise on which a moral framework must be constructed. Kant's categorical imperative, which he states as “Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law” appears on the face of it to be another expression of the golden rule, and it so it might be assumed that Kant had this end-point in mind when formulating his moral philosophy. Craig (2002:23) appears to take this position when he says that Kant “went for simplification in basing morality on a single principle closely related to the familiar 'what would happen if everyone did

that?"

In fact, I believe that this misrepresents Kant's position. Kant's categorical imperative is the conclusion of a beautifully designed argument which is not in the least polluted by any subjective moral values or assumptions.

To quote from Kant's preface to "Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals":

Everyone must admit that if a law is to have moral force, i.e., to be the basis of an obligation, it must carry with it absolute necessity ... therefore, the basis of obligation must not be sought in the nature of man, or in the circumstances in the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in the conception of pure reason; and although any other precept which is founded on principles of mere experience may be in certain respects universal, yet in as far as it rests even in the least degree on an empirical basis, perhaps only as to a motive, such a precept, while it may be a practical rule, can never be called a moral law.

Kant believes that the definition of a "good will" is one which accords with reason: it provokes actions which are rational. It may be that an action happens to make people happy, or appears to involve the agent putting others' needs before his own, and this may be regarded by society as morally good, or virtuous, but any consequences or intended consequences, Kant says, tell us nothing about whether the act is 'good'. In fact the word 'good' is somewhat emotionally loaded; perhaps it would be better to substitute 'suitable for a rational being'.

What Kant is constructing here is a basis for behaviour that is appropriate for someone who is acting rationally. When Kant says that any maxim for action is valid only if that maxim could act as a universal law, he is not trying to say "think whether you'd feel happy for everyone to act in that way", but rather: "the

consequence of everyone acting in this way must not nullify the maxim, otherwise it would be logically indefensible.”

Taken in this light, it can be seen that Kant is saying that it is incumbent on us, as rational beings, to act rationally, and when we act from this motivation, which means that we will obey 'universalisable' maxims, we are then acting with a good will.

Kant famously gives the example of the lying promise as a maxim which nullifies itself when made universal:

Then I presently become aware that while I can will the lie, I can by no means will that lying should be a universal law. For with such a law there would be no promises at all, since it would be in vain to allege my intention in regard to my future actions to those who would not believe this allegation, or if they over hastily did so would pay me back in my own coin. Hence my maxim, as soon as it should be made a universal law, would necessarily destroy itself.

Problems

The categorical imperative appears to produce the same answer as the golden rule in many cases. For example, the maxim “I will not kill people” could be applied universally, while “I will kill people” could not (if everyone adopted that maxim, there would be no-one left to obey it). There are though, some cases which don't accord with our sense of 'right'. For a start, there are some maxims which seem to be honourable and virtuous which cannot be applied as universal laws.

For example, the maxim “I will learn to swim in order to be able to save the lives of non-swimmers” seems like it should be one that we should adopt, but applying it

universally would nullify it, since there would be no non-swimmers left to save. But surely this doesn't mean that no-one should learn to swim? I suggest that the problem here is with the formulation of the maxim, which, because it cannot logically work when applied universally, cannot be a cause of 'good' actions. If you learned to swim because of a duty to *this specific maxim*, you would not be acting rationally, and your action would therefore have no moral worth. A 'good' reason for learning to swim would be a maxim that can be universally applied, such as "I will learn to swim in order to be able to save those who get into difficulty in the water". This might seem as if we are splitting hairs, because the end result is the same (I learn to swim), but the important thing to keep in mind is that the results of actions are totally irrelevant to whether the actions themselves are 'good' - the goodness of an action is purely judged on its motivation.

Some maxims may not appear to result in good acts, even though they may be applied universally. For example, "I will wave at the moon every time I see it". This is not particularly harmful, but doesn't seem very good either. However, so long as the waving is done from a sense of duty to the maxim, it must count, in Kant's terms, as a 'good action'.

On the other hand, there are some maxims which appear to be able to be stated universally without illogic, but have consequences which don't feel right, for example "I will kill cats". According to Kant, it seems that someone who killed cats on the basis of this this maxim would be conducting an action of "genuine moral worth". I believe this may be dealt with under the heading of "conflicting maxims":

One significant problem with the categorical imperative appears to be that maxims can conflict. Faced with a situation where you have to decide between lying to someone (against the maxim, "I will not lie") and hurting someone (against "I will not hurt people"), then it seems as if you are bound to do something wrong. The cat-killing maxim is also likely to be in conflict with other maxims, since "I will not hurt people" must apply to cat-lovers, who presumably will suffer hurt at the prospect of imminent feline extinction. According to Sullivan(1989:74), Kant's view is that in such cases we must use judgement to decide which of the perceived duties has the "stronger ground of obligation". However, it has to be admitted that this seems rather a weak answer, in that it leaves the decision up to the agent's own subjective judgement.

Choosing maxims

Kant defines immoral action as that which is contrary to reason, and the categorical imperative gives us a way to test which maxims are logically consistent and therefore rational: the reason for an agent to formulate and act in accordance with maxims is in order to act rationally. Taken in this light, I think that the categorical imperative can act as a very good starting point in helping to choosing our maxims. We should be able to decide on the basis of reason which maxims are valid. However, choosing a set of maxims is only part of the story: a rational agent must also be able to choose when it is appropriate to act in accordance with

a maxim (or which maxim to apply in a certain case).

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REFERENCES

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