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Fourth paper- Kant/Nietzsche

**Take any one of Kant’s four examples (suicide, lying promise, cultivation of talents, charity) and assess whether Kant’s reasoning about it only works supposing a specific or arbitrary formulation of the relevant maxim**

The Categorical Imperative (CI) was a moral theory proposed by Immanuel Kant which suggested that a person is to “act only on the maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant). There are certain moral duties that are categorical imperatives which tell human beings how they ought to act, and thus command them to adopt certain actions. Assessing Kant’s reasoning regarding the lying promise through the CI, it is argued that his reasoning holds regarding the lying promise using specific formulations of the CI on the relevant maxim but any arbitrary formulation may not hold for it, or for all moral principles or decisions. Therefore, Kant’s four examples only enable us to rationally exhibit by means of certain formulations of the CI, how specific maxims of acts such as lying promises, which we already recognize to be immoral, are immoral

Kant held that individuals have moral responsibilities owing to their ability to exercise rational choices independently of others. To enable understanding of how the categorical imperative is to be applied, four formulations are offered. The first is the universality principle which is to “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (Kant). The second formulation “act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature” refers to the law of nature and its connection to moral law. The third formulation of the CI connects moral law to the principles of humanity, “act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means” (Kant). The fourth formulation is concerned with autonomy and free choice which suggests that “the idea of the will of every rational being as a will giving universal law”.

For Kant, goodwill is something that carries intrinsic moral worth and is not merely good because it achieves a better end, but because it is inherently good in of itself. Subsequently, Kant proposed maxims, or generalized rules, that characterize an action’s motives. The maxim of doing what is right is indicative of a will which is good, and respect for moral law determines the moral worth of an action. Kant was of the view that speaking the truth is a duty in of itself rather than a duty because it prevented others from being injured. Thus, consequences did not matter as much as the moral essence of the action or the decision taken by the individual while exercising his rational ability. Applying the same principle, Kant proposed the example of a promise that one makes without the intention of keeping it. To be rational requires not to be self-contradictory; however, not all immoral actions may involve a self-contradiction. For instance, if an individual were to say that lying promises can be made if it achieves something desirable, it does not involve any contradiction. However, when a maxim contradicts itself once it is universalized as a law of nature, then it becomes irrational to perform. Thus, when every rational individual starts to make false promises to achieve a desirous end, this will lead to contradictions. It indicates that this particular formulation also holds.

In the case of the other example regarding suicide, a maxim which holds that suicide is rational once living brings more pain than pleasure is not moral because this cannot be made into a universal law. It is not possible for everyone to consistently will this maxim to become a universal law. Since it could only be held rational if a rational agent could consistently will this maximum to be a universal law; therefore such a maxim cannot be morally correct. Similarly, the same reasoning works in case of the lying promise. If an individual adopts the maxim that ‘When I require money, I will promise to repay the money I borrow, knowing inside that I will not repay it’, it will be morally incorrect because if no individual could consistently will such a maxim to become universal, since no one would lend money in such a world.

Another formulation by which Kant’s reasoning regarding the lying promise works, is by assessing whether one’s duties are consistent with making a lying promise. If the same maxim that ‘When I require money, I will promise to repay the money I borrow, knowing inside that I will not repay it’ is used, then could a world where such a maxim becomes universal law exist? Such a world cannot exist because if it becomes universal law, everyone would be aware of it. Thus, when someone in need of money requests the other to lend him some, that person would assume that the former is making a lying promise. However, because everyone knows this maxim, therefore the ability to deceive would not exist in a world where lying about returning money is universal law. Because it is known by all that a lying to return money is a universal law, there would be no one to buy into the idea or agree to be deceived. A contradiction thus exists, because when imagining a world where lying promises are universal, there is no room for lying or deception. This self-contradiction implies that there cannot be such a world where a maxim such as this is universal.

Furthermore, the same maxim also contradicts with the formulation of humanity and to the idea of being a human being. The maxim involves treating an individual as a means or an instrument to what one desires (Kant). A world where lying promises become universal law cannot have others agreeing to be lied to; therefore a common goal does not exist in the case. Moreover, by applying the CI formulation of humanity, human beings are supposed to be ends in of themselves which necessarily requires that they should be able to share a common goal or an end. Achieving such a common end is not possible in the case of universal deception, such as in the case of lying promises. Likewise, if the maxim was to be modified and restricted to a specific individual with whom a lying promise is to be made. The act would still be incorrect because of the third CI formulation and because everyone will know that being lied to is possible when an individual is in the same position as the one who proposed the maxim. Therefore, the act is morally incorrect because of the second and the third formulation of the CI given by Kant.

However, assessing whether the universalizability tests for the proposed maxims can serve as a standard for all cases of moral deliberations, if Kant’s reasoning is to be used; then it is possible that arbitrary formulations may not hold. The tests proposed by Kant are better suited to test maxims individually for their moral correctness or incorrectness but are not sufficient to provide a positive duty or moral rule. That is so because these tests help conclude that making lying promises is morally incorrect insofar as that it is not rational to perform such an action relying upon the maxim that is used for testing. It does not indicate the impossibility of certain maxims existing through which lying promises or suicide could be made universal (Wood).

The formulations used as universalizability tests are also prone to produce false negatives, in which maxims that are held to be morally correct or innocent could fail a specific or arbitrary formulation. For instance, if a maxim were to exist that ‘When two cars are at a crossing, I will always allow the other car to pass first and only go second’, then morally there is nothing reprehensible about the maxim, yet it could still not be accepted as a universal law. There are many relevant maxims, related to promises, that can be made which would fail a certain formulation but would still not violate laws that are already held to be universally acceptable. Likewise, there is also a risk of false positives when testing against Kant’s formulations. These would involve maxims that are seen to be morally incorrect or impermissible under any reasonable or rational moral law, but can still pass the test according to a specific formulation. Actions may be intentional on many different levels and descriptions of specificity or generality (Wood). Therefore, these formulations do not provide a universal standard to determine the extent of specificity that can be used to construct a maxim to apply Kant’s CI formulations upon, nor does it provide details of any intentional features that would be relevant to the action being morally evaluated.

In this case, it can be inferred that Kant aimed to provide an illustration of the inconsistencies in our will if we tried to make certain morally questionable maxims as universal codes of conduct. Thus, they serve as instruments to enable individuals to rationally observe how maxims that are already recognized to be morally incorrect can be demonstrated as unlawful or incorrect in light of specific formulations of the CI. It can, therefore, be concluded, that the relevant maxims to lying promises discussed by Kant hold in light of specific formulations, but it is possible for false positives or false negatives to occur owing to the nature of these formulations; therefore any arbitrary formulation may not hold for all types of maxims relevant to lying promises. Hence, moral deliberation, using Kant's reasoning, can thus generate rules that apply in particular maxims or cases, still in a flexible manner, that leave room for exercising individual judgment or discretion.

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