

Is Morality Rational?

Topic #3

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Kant claims that violations of the categorical imperative are irrational acts. This paper discusses that claim.

In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argues for his *Categorical Imperative* as a foundation for morality based, fundamentally, on the idea that a “good will” is the only thing that is always good. To instantiate this principle of good will, Kant proposes several different formulations of his Categorical Imperative. To clarify the discussion, we will focus here just on the Universal Law Formulation, which Kant states as follows:

I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law. (Kant 4:402)¹

Kant is arguing here for the idea that if you have a personal rule, or as Kant calls it, a “maxim”, that guides your behaviour (even in some instance) you should only act on those personal rules that you would be willing to have everyone else also follow; one familiar way of thinking of this is that you as a moral actor should be willing to have others treat you as you would treat them, and vice versa. While the Golden Rule is not the whole of the Universal Law Formulation of Kant’s Categorical Imperative, this notion is clearly contained within it. He argues that it is our good will that can be universalized, and our ill will cannot.

Kant uses several examples to make his point. One of these examples is the case of a man who needs money, and is considering making a false promise in order to obtain it. (Kant 4:402). Kant argues that such an act is immoral, but that perhaps more importantly, such an act, under the Categorical Imperative is in fact irrational. The maxim is irrational because such a strategy is essentially self-defeating. Why? Consider that if your law was universalized, then if everyone made a false promise to obtain money, no one would be able to obtain their goal by that means. Since everyone would expect your promise to repay the money to actually be false, no one would be willing to give you the money. Thus, your means to obtain your goal would be certainly ineffective. In addition, the very notion of a promise would be at best vacuous, or actually impossible, since the very notion of a promise implies that

¹ Page citations for Kant will follow the German Academy pagination. Any quotes from this text referring to the Introduction will be cited under that author’s name.

promises can, and will be, kept, and yet here, none would be. Kant thinks that in this light, the personal rule or maxim, and thus the action, is certainly irrational.

Kant then goes one step further and also insists that there is a connection between that irrationality and immorality. The act of making a false promise to obtain money expediently lacks good will. Kant appeals to our duty as rational beings to behave rationally. In this formulation, the duty is to ourselves as rational beings. (Kant's alternate formulation of the Categorical Imperative, the Formula of Humanity, approaches the duty question from the standpoint of our duty to other rational agents; however, this version of the Categorical Imperative is beyond the scope of this paper.) Thus, Kant believes that rationality and morality are intimately connected, precisely because we are rational beings.

Based on this one example, it appears at first that Kant may be on to something. If, according to the Universal Law Formulation, we are to universalize our maxim or personal rule to the whole of society, then in the case of making a false promise to obtain money, we would indeed expect that others would take advantage of us, as we have tried to do. The impossibility and self-contradictions inherent in the universalization of our maxim makes this act illogical, and also immoral, because it lacks good will. In this case, we would likely find that even when we made true promises, it would be expected that we were lying, and no one would lend anyone any money. It creates a situation that is contradictory to the desired end, one teeming with bad will, and so would, in some sense, appear to be irrational, *if* we are indeed compelled to universalize our actions. But are we?

Kant's case that anything contrary to the Categorical Imperative would be immoral seems to be a strong one at first. Those things which are immoral do seem to generate irrational and contradictory situations when applied universally. As such, it seems a good test for morality because it leaves us with an objective basis on which to judge our moral judgments. However, the case that violations of the Categorical Imperative are necessarily irrational is less clear, at least in the Universal Law Formulation. As long as the principle of action, such as giving a false promise to obtain money, is not universal in

actual fact, it is difficult to see how this act is irrational in and of itself, even in it remains immoral.

Without the Categorical Imperative in one form or another, this action appears perfectly rational, and a straightforward way to obtain immediate goals. Indeed, as long as most people, most of the time still tell the truth when asking others for money, it will remain expedient for some people to fudge to the truth in obtaining their ends. One could, suppose, formulate a maxim that is probabilistic, so that one doesn't lie, for instance, more than a certain percentage of the time. As long as that percentage was low enough, then there would still be a high expectation of truth-telling, and lying would indeed be effective and expedient. It will require an understanding of game theory to see this, but game theory was not well-developed for two centuries after Kant. (Ross, 1997) It is likely, however, that Kant would object to a probabilistic formulation since what he is envisioning is a straight-forward solution to every situation: never make false promises. What Kant requires then is clear reasons for why the Categorical Imperative must be obeyed, and why it must form the basis of morality, and rationality, for him.

Kant here must fall back on his good will argument. He argues for his Categorical Imperative by responding that being unwilling to follow the Categorical Imperative requires that you hold yourself up to a different standard than everyone else, typically by means of special pleading. (Kant 4:424) Clearly, Kant does not think anyone should be held to a different (lower) standard than everyone else. If I am a rational being, and you are a rational being, then we are the same, and should be treated equally. Thus, the idea that it is acceptable to sometimes lie when we expect everyone else to tell the truth cannot be considered moral. Kant would likely assert this even without making efforts to connect these same moral violations to concurrent rational violations.

But let us take the case of making false promises a little further and consider the case of a kind of Robin Hood figure, who lied to the wealthy in order to obtain money for the poor. (For our example, it does not matter if he is acting for himself as well, or for others only.) How are we to judge such an example? The Utilitarian would certainly claim that if you can steal from a wealthy man enough money

to feed and clothe many poor people, then such deception is justifiable, because the increase in happiness among the impoverished *many* more than makes up for the decrease in happiness in a wealthy *one* who is still, probably, quite well-off. And in our mythical notions of the Robin Hood legend, we do indeed look at this figure as fundamentally doing a good thing. And it would be difficult to argue that he is lacking in good will. But how is Kant to respond to such a situation? Does he insist that the poor should take the moral high ground at the risk of starving to death because he is unwilling to universalize false promises, or theft? Would he permit the formulation of a maxim that allows making false promises to obtain money only if taking the money does not actually cause them long-term harm, if they already have more than they need? And if so, who judges who is worthy of being victims of false promising, and those who are to be the recipients of the thief's largess? Does the Categorical Imperative make as much sense in a society where there is such great disparity between the haves and have-nots, as it does in a society striving for social, political and financial equality? Could the Categorical Imperative even have been formulated in 12th century England? Can the actions of a Robin Hood be made to make moral sense under the Universal Law Formulation of the Categorical Imperative? This is not entirely clear.

Kant's Universal Law Formulation of the Categorical Imperative was not meant by Kant to stand on its own. His second formulation, the Formulation of Humanity, makes clear in many of the more questionable examples here where Kant would come down. Probabilistic formulations of maxims would certainly be disallowed because they would allow us to treat others as "mere means" (Kant 4:428), and likewise, Robin Hood figures would be seen as immoral for the same reason, since he is treating the wealthy as a means to help the poor. The two formulations are necessary side-by-side to make sense of Kant's thinking because one formulation acts to plug the conceptual gaps left by the other, but a more complete treatment is simply not possible here. Kant, nonetheless, makes some strong claims about the relationship between morality and rationality. If the Categorical Imperative can indeed be made

obligatory, the argument for irrationality of acts of ill will are made stronger, but only when limitations are placed on the precise formulations of the maxims to be universalized through the notion of a good will.

Bibliography

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Ross, D. (1997). *Game Theory*. Retrieved May 21, 2010, from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2010 Edition): <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/game-theory>