

Kant's Supreme Principle of Morality

Marvyn Bailly

Philosophy 205: Ethics

Dr. Stenberg

15 November 2020

Question 2

In Kantianism ethics, one supreme principle of morality is set forth by Kant which he demonstrates through three different formulations that although mean the same principle, highlight unique aspects of the supreme principle. The formulations create a sufficient foundation for Kantian ethics that even if they implied unique principles, meaning that there is no singular principle of morality. Kant's work does not crumble since the meaning rather than the equality of the three principles is what is taken away from Kantian ethics. His fundamental ideas still hold and create a platform for the rest of his work. To show that the formulations represent a singular principle of morality, it is important to understand imperatives, Kant's three formulations, and examples of each in an application. Through the applications, it will be seen that the same conclusion is reached, and therefore, the formulation all represents the single principle of morality that Kant claims. Furthermore, I believe that since the same conclusion is reached from each formulation, even if the formulation represented different moral principles, Kant's ideas still hold.

Kant begins by searching for a fundamental principle of reason that can determine a rational being's action. Rational beings utilize a set of laws, or a will, while reasoning between rational and irrational actions. A being with a "perfect will" will always follow what reason requires, that is, they will always act rationally. Now consider a being with an imperfect will, one that has been influenced by factors other than reason, meaning that the being processes the ability to reason and correctly choose the rational action, but will not always do so. Such a species are humans, humans are imperfects. They require objective principles to constrain our imperfect will. Kant refers to these constraints as imperatives, which exist to command a rational

being with an imperfect will to act rationally despite the corruption of imperfect influences. In contrast to a human's imperfect will, a perfect does not require imperatives as their natural choice will already be the rational choice. Kant differentiates imperatives into two categories, hypothetical and categorical imperatives.

Kant describes that hypothetical imperatives are conditional commands that may only apply to a group of beings depending on the goal they wish to achieve. While categorical imperatives are universal, unconditional commands that all imperfect rational beings must apply to. Hypothetical imperatives state that certain actions will achieve a specific goal. These imperatives only apply to beings who wish to achieve the goal, so they are optional, an individual can choose to follow the imperative. Since Kant searches for a universal principle of reason, hypothetical imperatives are insufficient. On the contrary, categorical imperative applies to all imperfect rational beings. They state to do an action with no specific consequence intended and therefore are not constrained to a specific group of beings. The imperative simply requires the being to follow the criteria of the imperative. Kant claims that only one such imperative exists which he describes through three formulations that highlight different aspects of the one supreme principle of morality.

Kant's first formulation is the Formula of the Universal Law of Nature which states, "act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become the universal law" (pg. 303). Since there is only one unconditional imperative that every rational being must comply with, the Formula of Universal Law will also apply to all rational beings. The formula states that a will should only act upon a maxim that applies to all. A maxim is a rational rule which states that in order to reach a goal, a set of actions can be justified. The first step in figuring out of a maxim follows the formulation is to identify the maxim itself. Next, the maxim

must be extended to all rational beings and checked to see if the goal is still achieved by the actions without contradictions. If the universal maxim passes, then it is morally acceptable but if a contradiction arises when either extending the maxim to all rational beings or when considering the logic of the maxim for all rational beings, the moral is not acceptable.

To further understand the first formulation, consider Kant's fourth example where he presents a well-off person who believes that they should not extend help to others in need since everyone's happiness relies on their capabilities. The maxim in this situation would along the lines, since I do not need help, I do not need to help others. To extend this maxim to all rational beings, it would follow that anyone who is doing well does not need to help others. Since this is realistic, there is no contradiction in the concept of the maxim. Now consider the logic behind the maxim. If there would be a group of people who were content, group A, and another group who weren't, group B, there would be no way for group B to obtain satisfaction since group A would not be required to help, therefore group B is expected to reach happiness without help and thus a contradiction lies. The maxim requires people to be content without giving them the tools to achieve it. Since group B would not be able to will satisfaction, the maxim is immoral by Kant's first formulation which extends to the supreme principle of morality.

Kant's second formulation is the Formula of Humanity which states that "act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person in that of any other, in every case as end withal, never as means only" (pg. 306). To understand this formulation, it is first important to talk about ends and means. An end is that which justifies and brings forth the will for acting a mean, what is hoped to be achieved. Like imperatives, ends can be either conditional or unconditional. Conditional ends are specific to a person and their desires and dreams while unconditional ends extend to all rational beings and must be followed without choice. Kant claims that rational beings are

unconditional ends themselves since rational beings have a sense of self-value and seek to preserve and better themselves as an instinct. Since everyone is an end in themselves, Kant says that rational beings shouldn't treat others as means. That no rational being should use another being to better themselves.

Applying Kant's second formulation to the same example of a person who believes that they do not need to help others since they are already content. I reach the same conclusion as before; the person is acting immoral since they are not treating others as an end but rather as a mean. Consider groups A and B again. For group A to treat group B as an end, they must recognize that group B are also rational beings that value themselves in the same way as group A. In doing so, group A is treating group B as a means for their satisfaction by ignoring group B's values, making group A's actions immoral. Following the same thinking, the person who does not help others is also acting immorally since they are using them as a means. And so, I have arrived at the same conclusion by using both Kant's first and second formulation.

Kant's third and final formulation is the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends which proposes a kingdom consisting of ends, rational beings from the previous formulation, and a law that states the second formulation, to treat everybody as an end in themselves. All ends in the kingdom abide by the law and with common law, the Kingdom of Ends is formed. Since all members of the kingdom treat each other as ends, they are all equal and there is no rational being within the kingdom that is above the law and can do as they will without respect to the law. Since all members have equal power, every member is a lawgiver who has the ability to create universal laws for the kingdom. To better understand the laws that are being outlined in the kingdom, consider Kant's first formulation they are those which all maxims within the kingdom must follow without contradiction. In addition to the first formulation, the law must also respect

the anatomy of each end in the kingdom and thus create harmony. The anatomy of a member is the respect of ends within the kingdom including themselves and since every end is to respect others as ends, the kingdom is autonomous and harmonized. That is all ends respect themselves and others and therefore will also follow every universal law proposed by themselves and the others.

Applying the final formulation to the same example as before, if the person were to set forth the law that an end does not need to help another end in need if they are better off than them. The law may be agreed on within the kingdom as long as nobody uses others as means, meaning that they have willed their satisfaction without benefiting from others, but this would only negatively affect the anatomy of the kingdom bringing it out of harmony. Not all ends would be able to efficiently follow this law, regarding the two groups A and B, perhaps group A was only able to will their satisfaction through means that were unviable to group B, and therefore the two groups end in themselves. Making the action immoral within the Kingdom of Ends. Once again, I have arrived at the same conclusion through all of the formulations. Although each approaches the morality of the maxim differently, the maxim always returns as immoral.

Kant claims that these three formulations are all the same way of describing the one moral principle, the only difference between them being that they highlight different aspects of the principle. He claims that every maxim consists of a “form, consisting in universality” a “matter, namely, an end,” and a “complete characterization of all maxims” (pg. 310). The form of a maxim is found in the Formula of the Universal Law of Nature which states that the form of a maxim must fit the universal laws of nature, that is, apply to all rational beings and follow the criteria outlined in the formulations. The matter of a maxim is the end, the rational being is an

end of itself and nature, therefore the maxim must support the Formula of Humanity. And finally, the characterization of the maxim is that it must harmonize with all the ends within the kingdom it dwells in, and therefore it is related to the Kingdom of Ends. And thus, it is shown that not only do the three formulations have the same outputs, but together they form criteria for a maxim that allow them to be judged as moral and immoral regardless of the situation, place, or rational beings.

Although Kant claims that the three formulations state the same principle, it can be argued that each forms a unique principle creating multiple universal moral principles. I do not believe that coming to this conclusion would change the meaning of Kant's moral writings. From each formulation, the maxim would still have to follow one of the principles and since I have shown they result in the same output when applied to situations, all maxims would be judged the same under three unique principles as if they were under Kant's singular principle. Kant's principle states to treat others like you would want to be treated, to respect them, and to not use them for your benefit without their consent. If this would be split into three unique statements, they would still act together and bring forth a reasonable set of moral ethics that would be like Kant's singular. I do not believe that his work relies on the idea that the formulation is the same but rather that they set forth ideas that will create a harmonized relationship between all relational beings and nature.

Kant's moral principle weakens not when considering the three formulations but when seeing that his argument is based purely on rational beings. To Kant, a rational being is one that can use a will reason between rational and irrational choices. But consider someone who is mentally impaired and cannot make these choices. According to Kant, we must choose between treating them as a rational being to which the principle of ethic applies, or an irrational being. If

the person were to be treated as a rational being, then everyone must treat them as an end and respect the choices that make even if they are irrational. All one could do is advise them but command them which might save their life. For example, if they needed medication but did not remember or want to take it. A bystander would only be able to recommend the medication and observe the person if they choose not to take it. On the contrary, if they were not treated as a rational being, the principles would not apply to them and they could do as they will, be above the universal maxims, despite having an imperfect will.

Although there lays a problem when considering beings that are not quite rational, a lot can be learned from Kant. Regardless of if the three formulations create one principle, Kant says to treat others as you would treat yourself, to respect all others, and to not unconsciously use another. These ideas are inviting and would solve many current-day problems if Earth was a Kingdom of Ends. Poverty would be reduced as everyone would donate to charities to not use others as means. Racism and ageism would also vanish since these are results from not respecting others as the same ends as themselves. And rules would not be set forth which support corruption as they would contradict themselves. So although Kant's formulations do create a singular principle of morals, what should be taken away from Kantian ethics so what each formulation does to a maxim and the ideology of how humans should treat others.

Works cited

1. Steven M. Cahn and Peter Markie, *Ethics History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues* 5th edition (New York Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), 303-310