

Kantianism: Issues

Problems with application of the principle

Universalising maxims

- Universalising maxims that include relative or 'norm'-related positions (comparing oneself to another) does not always work in the way it perhaps should.
- CJH example 1: *When taking an exam, I will always try to come in the top half, to push myself.* This seems reasonable, but proves inconceivable seeing as we cannot conceive of a world in which we are all in the top half. This therefore entails that we have a perfect duty not to try and come in the top half, but also a perfect duty not to come in the bottom half. Nonetheless, acting on the maxim to try and come in the top half does not seem to be immoral.
- So the problem lies in trying to universalise maxims which compare ourselves to other people.
- CJH example 2: *I will always help the poor when I can afford to, to ease their plight.* Could this rationally be willed as a universal law? If everyone did this, there would be no poor. So we have an imperfect duty to not help the poor. This, evidently, would seem wrong.

Negative imperatives

- Many trivial acts which do not seem moral can be successfully universalised using Kant's philosophy (CJH example: *I will chew food 32 times before eating, to aid digestion*). However, for Kant, those maxims are simply morally permissible; we have no duty to do them.
- But this leads to a further criticism – that Kant's ethics only tells us what we can't do, it does not give a positive account of what we should aim to do.
- However, this could be argued to be a strength in the fact that it allows people to pursue their own projects and ends.

Non-moral maxims

- Kant's philosophy seems to work for non-moral maxims as well as moral ones.
- CJH example: *On trick or treat nights, I will go and collect sweets, but will not provide any at my house, to save money.* This is conceivable, but cannot be rationally willed seeing as following the maxim would destroy the institution of trick or treat, on which the maxim relies. So, as a rational being, it would seem that we have an imperfect duty not to do this. Although it is reasonable to not universalise just collecting sweets, this does not seem to be a moral issue, more an issue of cultural practice.
- So, according to Kant, it might seem that we have a duty to offer sweets if we also collect them. But if this is not a moral duty, then how do we distinguish non-moral duties from moral ones? This would require a prior understanding of morality which is not derived from the ability to universalise maxims.

Imperfect duties

- Imperfect duties are duties which we do not have to do all the time, e.g. general duties like helping others.
- We are praised if we do them, but blamed if we don't. This seems to leave us with a very vague moral duty. It could be criticised that we need more guidance on when the duties should be carried out, to what extent, etc.
- Thus, a more elaborate theory of imperfect duties is needed to overcome this issue.

Establishing contradiction

- In *Utilitarianism*, Ch. 1, Mill claims that when Kant attempts to deduce moral duties from the Categorical Imperative, he fails to show that there is any contradiction involved in being immoral.
- At best, he only shows that the consequences of everyone being immoral is something that we wouldn't want, but not something that we cannot will.
- Advocates of a logical contradiction interpretation support Kant in suggesting that he "means there is a straightforward logical contradiction in the proposed law of nature" (Koorsgaard 1998) in trying to will certain maxims. For example, the "universalisation of the maxim of false promising would undercut the very practice of making and accepting promises, thus making promises impossible and the maxim literally inconceivable" (Koorsgaard 1998).

Maxims

- Another issue involves the specifying of maxims that we can test using the categorical imperative. For instance, couldn't any action be justified, as long as we phrase the maxim cleverly?
- Lacewing example: *I can steal gifts from large shops when there are seven letters in my name (Michael)*. Universalising this maxim, only people with seven letters in their name would steal gifts and only from large shops. The case would apply so rarely that there would be no general breakdown in the concept of private property, so it would be perfectly possible for this law to apply for everyone.
- If we specify rules for maxims too tightly, then almost anything can be universalised. On the other hand, if we specify them too generally, then the theory becomes too strict and misses the complexity of the actual rules and principles that we follow in life.