

Paper 2, Option 2.3

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Kant's Ethics of Maxims

Maxims are the guiding principals that guide our lives and which direct our moral behavior. Although maxims are based on logic and reasoning, it is through the empirical experiences in our everyday lives that our maxims are developed. Because moral behavior is based on reason, Kant's universal law gives us a ration-centered method to test our maxims. Although maxims provide the general rules to live by, they do not hold for every situation.

Part 1. The grounding for Kant's ethics is based on reason which is prior to experience. Kant breaks down ethics into two separate fields, one based on experience or empirical ethics and the other based on "pure reason" and is termed morality, or "a priori" – meaning before experience (Kant, pg 264). Kant argues that morality cannot be distilled from experiences in our daily lives. For experiences are incomplete shadows of the pure moral principals. Kant further enforces the "a priori" grounds for ethics by comparing it to logic and then stating: "Logic cannot have any empirical part" (Kant, pg 263). Thus pure principals for morality must be founded, prior to experience, before any examples of morality can even be recognized as moral. Kant then argues that the "a priori" grounds for ethics lie in reason. Kant's belief that reason is fundamental in ethical behavior has ties back to Plato, who argued that the capacity to reason is given to humanity for a purpose and that this ability is what makes humanity unique. Kant takes

this belief a step further by stating that the purpose of reason is to make people moral. All moral acts are not only decided on through our reasoning, but it is the reasoning itself that defines the morality of the action. This reasoning process that a person goes through before deciding to act makes up the intentions of that person. It is neither the action nor the actions' effects that define the morality of the action. The morality is found before the action takes place and is literally in the mind of the person committing the action. This is based on the belief that all people (capable of reason) in all situations have the ability to act morally or not. If people always have the ability to act morally then this ability must be in our control. For if it is not always in our control, then in some situations, we could not always act morally. Our intentions, our reasons for committing an action, are the only thing that people have complete and total control over. Thus the morality of an act must be judged based solely on the intentions of the person committing it. Absolute good is then the intention to do good, solely for the sake of it being good, which Kant terms "moral duty" (Garret, slide 14). In essence, one should intend to do good irregardless of any other motivations one might have. The absolutely good person would then not need to have principals, or "maxims," by which to guide their lives, for their inclinations would always be to act out of a sense of moral duty. This is because maxims tell us what we should be doing, what our actions ought to be guided by. An absolutely good person, by nature, would already be doing these things, thus there is no "ought" for the absolutely good person (Garret, slide 24). Because there are no people (possibly a select few in all of history) that are absolutely good, we all must have our intentions guided by correct maxims. But how do we know that the maxims guiding our actions are the correct ones? This is where Kant says that no principal should be chosen unless it can pass the "universal law" test: "I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law" (Kant, pg 277). This states that any correct

maxim will not just work for you in your situation but for everyone in every situation. Thus Kant shows how with the “a priori” knowledge of this universal law, the moral worth of any action can be determined.

Part 2. Morality is something that is “a priori,” for it cannot be based in mere examples which would create a convoluted and overly complex form of morality. The morality upon which we base our ethical conduct must subsist of guiding principals, maxims. But where do these maxims come from? These maxims do not come to us “a priori” but through our experiences. This is most clearly shown through an example. Take a person from birth and eliminate all of their sense. This person could not interact with their environment in any conceivable way throughout their entire existence. Would this person be able to judge conduct as being good or bad? No, this person would not even be able to conceive of what actions even are, let alone determine their moral quality. This does not mean that ethical conduct does not exist if this person does not perceive it, but simply that this person would not have morals, and there would be no way for this person to obtain morals in a purely “a priori” manor. Although morals must be acquired empirically, they should not be obtained purely from personal experience or examples, as Kant indicates. Instead, morals should be distilled truths in their most pure form. Thus morality, and the maxims it entails, comes to each person almost exclusively through the empirical act of reading or listening to a person who has distilled them, as I am doing now in this class. Reason is the guiding principal behind moral conduct because distilled truths are themselves found through the use of reason. It is through reason that Kant’s concept of the universal law was developed. There are many maxims that could pass Kant’s test that would be in direct opposition to each other, and many critiques of Kant’s universal law point these out. However, because of the form of this imperative, along with several of Kant’s examples, it is

apparent that this universal law should only be applied to “true” maxims, ones which are properly generalized. In other words maxims should not be specific to any one situation or type of people, but instead should take on as simple a form as possible such as: *tell the truth*, *preserve life*, and *don't steal*. However, even in their simplest form, maxims may be in conflict. For example, if a person is harboring Jews and Nazis came to take them away to a concentration camp, the maxims *preserve life* and *do not lie* will be in conflict. Although this contradiction occurs it does not invalidate Kant's universal law, Kant's law simply needs to be altered from being applicable to everyone in every situation to being applicable to everyone in every “reasonable” situation. Where “reasonable” in this context means in day-to-day affairs and not extreme situations. There are a vast number of maxims that people can establish using the universal law and it is through our use of reason that each person can decide which ones must be set-aside in certain situations. The universal law does exactly what Kant meant it to do; to determine if our maxims are correct or not. The universal law can also be used to help find universal maxims given a particular situation. For instance, say a married man is becoming emotionally involved with a woman who is not his wife. Using Kant's universal law as the test for this behavior a logical contradiction arises. The very meaning of marriage is a monogamous relationship and commitment exclusively between two individuals of the opposite sex. Therefore, when married, having a close emotional relationship with someone of the opposite sex, other than a wife/husband (or family members) is in direct violation of the marriage commitment. From this specific example a general maxim arises: *honor your commitments*.

It is through empirical means that maxims themselves are learned. Through use of Kant's universal law our acquired maxims can be properly examined to see if they hold up to close logical scrutiny. If proven true then our actions should always conform to these maxims under

normal circumstances. Although proven true, there are extreme situations in which maxims may not be followed. This is precisely why it is in the extreme situations that the true moral worth of a person can be found.

References (MLA 2004 Referencing Standards)

Kant, Immanuel. "Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals." Trans. James Ellington. Morality and the Good Life. Ed. Robert Solomon. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004. 259-314.

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