Directed Studies Philosophy
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Formulating Maxims to Test their Morality: Sources of Ambiguity in Kant's Moral Philosophy

by Dan Friedman

In the *Grounding*, Kant argues that a single rule—the "categorical imperative"—guides

all moral conduct: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that

it should become a universal law" (Kant, Ak. 421).[1] Kant claims that "with this compass in hand"

anybody can determine the morality of any action (404), but he does not explain how to perform

a critical part of the test: formulating the maxim of the action. In this paper, I will explain how,

by Kant's definition of a maxim, the maxim of any action can be formulated in significantly

different ways and the absence of rules for the formulation of maxims can lead to contradictory

or absurd moral conclusions. I will argue that Kant's theory avoids absurdity but fails to entirely

eliminate ambiguity from the moral evaluation of maxims, weakening Kant's moral philosophy

by rendering it unable to establish definite moral laws.

Kant defines a maxim as "the subjective principle of acting" (421, footnote 9). In other

words, for any action that an individual performs in a given situation, the maxim is the principle

that instructs the individual to perform that action given that situation; a maxim is distinct from

a moral law because it is derived from subjective personal interests, not from duty. By defining a

maxim as "*the* subjective principle of acting," Kant seems to imply that every action has only

one expressible maxim. But Kant's definition allows that the maxim of an action can be

formulated in various ways, ranging from highly particular at one extreme to highly abstract at

[1] Immanuel Kant. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. James W. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett
Publishing Company, Inc., 1993.

the other. For example, to test the morality of borrowing money without the intention of paying it back, Kant formulates the maxim of the action as, "when I believe myself to be in need of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, although I know that I can never do so" (422). But other formulations of the maxim could account for the action equally well. The maxim can be more particular—as in, "When I need ten dollars to keep from starving I will borrow ten dollars without intending to pay it back"—or it can be more abstract—as in, "I will lie whenever I feel it will benefit me." Both of these formulations meet Kant's definition of a maxim as the subjective principle of action—they both derive from subjective personal interest and instruct an individual to perform an action in a given situation—and Kant gives no explicit rule for deciding which formulation should be used to test the morality of the action.

Kant's failure to provide clear guidelines for formulating maxims is problematic because formulating the maxim of an action in different ways can lead to different conclusions about the morality of the action. For example, Kant deems borrowing money without intending to pay it back immoral because the maxim of the action, in his formulation, cannot be universalized without contradicting itself. If everyone made false promises to avoid difficulty, "no one would believe what was promised him" so no one would be able to make promises; universalizing the maxim makes the maxim impossible (422). The universality test would deem the more abstract formulation of the maxim ("I will lie whenever I feel it will benefit me") immoral on similar grounds: the maxim cannot be universalized because the universality of the maxim would make lying impossible, causing the maxim to contradict itself. However, the more particular formulation of the maxim ("When I need ten dollars to keep from starving I will borrow ten dollars without intending to pay it back") seems to be moral by the universality test. Because the maxim prescribes dishonesty only in very particular situations, if the maxim were a universal law

then almost all people could still be expected to behave honestly almost all of the time. Universalizing the maxim would not undo the possibility of dishonesty so it would not undo the possibility of the maxim, and the universality test deems the maxim moral. Thus, formulating the maxim of a single action in different ways leads to contradictory conclusions about the morality of the action.

This problem becomes more pronounced the more particularly a maxim is formulated. Testing the morality of an action by formulating an excessively particular maxim appears to produce conclusions that are not just contradictory, but absurd. For example, suppose that, overcome by fatigue, I appeal to the categorical imperative to determine whether or not it is morally conscionable for me to go to bed. If I formulate the maxim of the action somewhere between the extremes of abstraction and particularity—as in, "When I am tired I will go to bed"—then the universality test indicates that the action is moral, in agreement with common sense. But I can also formulate an extremely particular maxim for the same action: "When I am tired I will go sleep in my bed, located in room D32B of Durfee Hall in Yale." If this maxim were a universal law every tired person in the world would swarm into my room, likely causing chaos and death. Universalizing the maxim would undo the possibility of sleeping in my bed, thereby undoing the possibility of the maxim itself and leading to the absurd conclusion that it is immoral for me to sleep in my bed. If Kant does not offer guidelines for formulating maxims then this extreme formulation is available to test the morality of actions, and Kant's moral philosophy becomes not just contradictory but absurd.

But even without clear guidelines for formulating maxims, Kant can avoid the absurd or contradictory conclusions of excessively particular maxims through the operation of the universality test itself. It is evident from Kant's examples of the universality test that the process

of evaluating a maxim as a universal law entails replacing all personal referents in the maxim with universal referents and all particular components of the maxim with more abstract ones. For example, to evaluate the maxim that "when I believe myself to be in need of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, although I know that I can never do so," Kant reformulates it in more abstract, universal terms: "anyone believing himself to be in difficulty could promise whatever he pleases with the intention of not keeping it" (422). In addition to replacing the personal referent "I" with the universal referent "anyone," Kant also replaces the particular "need of money" with the more abstract "difficulty" and the particular deceit of borrowing money dishonestly with the more abstract deceit of "promis[ing] whatever he pleases" dishonestly. That is to say, in the act of evaluating a maxim as a universal law Kant alters the formulation of the maxim, replacing personal referents with universal referents and replacing particular components of the maxim with abstract components.

The de-particularization and depersonalization of maxims by the operation of the universality test prevent the absurd conclusion reached by the particular maxim, "When I am tired I will go sleep in my bed, located in room D32B of Durfee Hall in Yale." That maxim produces an absurd conclusion only if it is evaluated as a universal law without being fully depersonalized, as when I replace the personal referent "I" with the universal referent "all tired people" without replacing the personal location "my bed" with a universal location. If, however, I replace both personal referents with universal referents, the universal formulation of the maxim would be "When people are tired they should go sleep in their respective beds," which passes the universality test. Thus, Kant avoids the absurd conclusions derived from overly particular maxims without making specific rule about avoiding overly particular formulations. The very process of evaluating their viability as universal law de-particularizes particular maxims.

But this solution fails to fully eliminate ambiguity from Kant's moral philosophy. While Kant clearly indicates that particular maxims should be reformulated in more abstract terms, he does not indicate exactly how abstract they should become beyond the basic rule that personal referents should be replaced with universal referents. For example, Kant's universalized maxim that "anyone believing himself to be in difficulty could promise whatever he pleases with the intention of not keeping it" (422) is more abstract than the particular maxim from which it is derived but more particular than other conceivable formulations of the same maxim, for example, "anyone who wants to can lie." Kant gives no clear rule for choosing between the two formulations.

In the above case, both formulations still lead to the conclusion that deceit is immoral. The ambiguity has greater consequences regarding a maxim such as "When I need ten dollars to keep from starving I will borrow ten dollars without intending to pay it back." Kant formulates the same maxim more abstractly, omitting the particular details about the dollar limit and the precondition of starvation, and he reformulates the maxim in even more abstract terms to evaluate it as a universal law (422). This indicates that the more particular formulation of the maxim, specifying a dollar limit and the precondition of starvation, should be reformulated in more abstract terms before it is tested for morality, possibly avoiding the problematic conclusion that borrowing money without intention to repay is morally acceptable in limited cases. But because Kant gives no guidelines for how abstract a maxim should become he cannot entirely preclude the possibility of formulating a maxim that is abstract enough to be evaluated as a universal law but particular enough to produce moral conclusions that contradict the conclusions of a more abstract formulation of the same maxim. Even though Kant successfully avoids the absurd conclusions of excessively particular maxims, his failure to provide guidelines

for the formulation or for the reformulation of maxims weakens his moral philosophy by rendering it unable to establish definite moral laws.

Kant sees the universality test of the categorical imperative as a complete guide to moral conduct, simple enough for anybody to understand. "I need no far-reaching acuteness to discern what I have to do in order that my will may be morally good," he writes (403). But it takes some acuteness to fill in the part of the theory that Kant neglects to explain: how to formulate maxims. Kant's omission, only partly remedied by the operation of the universality test, allows contradiction and ambiguity into his moral philosophy, and it also makes it more difficult to decide how to behave. Without clear rules about the formulation of maxims, Kant's moral philosophy is difficult and incomplete.