Introduction to Philosophy (PHIL104)

Handout 10
Kant III

CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE. In the categorical imperative we are supposed to abstract from conditions. So it must have categorical form. Kant gives several formulations of the imperative that is supposed to underlie categorical maxims.

FUL 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time [rationally] will it should become a universal law.'

Closely aligned with FUL is another formula:

FLN 'Act *as if* the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.'

The task of CI is to provide a test for the maxims we adopt in our behaviour. CI specifies a necessary condition that a morally actionable maxim should satisfy. That is: a maxim is moral, and acting on it has moral worth, only if the maxim satisfies CI.

Kant works with four examples. Let us focus on the first two.

Suicide. The first is *suicide*. Suppose that, facing some serious problems (bankruptcy, unrequited love etc.), I decide to commit suicide. The reason, I notice, is self-love: I wish to avoid pain out of concern for myself (and not, say, out of concern for the overall amount of pain in the world). Then I in effect follow the maxim 'Out of self-love I ought to shorten my life for the sake of avoiding future pain.' If I test this maxim with FLN, then, Kant says, I see 'at once' that such a maxim could not become a universal law of nature. The reason is that self-love, by definition, is charged with preserving your life and at the same time is now also charged with terminating it. Contradiction.

Well, is it really? As a maxim of skill, it is not especially admirable, but perhaps there is nothing immoral about it either. Self-love may be charged with extending life in *pleasant* circumstances, rather than in *all* circumstances. I.e. self-love may have the task of increasing pleasures of the agent, rather than the task of preserving his life. It would be charged with preserving life only indirectly, since you can have pleasure only when you are alive. This is indeed a far more natural idea of self-love. Those people who committed suicide when captured by the enemy—they did it, we think, out of concern for themselves, and before that they went on with their lives out of the very same concern.

For Kant's reasoning to be convincing, he ought to show that my conduct must always be in accord with the rule: 'No one should ever commit suicide.' It is not at all clear that we can prove it by appeal to FLN (let alone FUL).

Remark 1. Another concern with the suicide example is that the teleological argument it is based on is rather feeble.

Question 2. Why does not Kant try to show the prohibition on suicide by the appeal to FUL?

Keeping promises. Here the issue is about giving promises with the intention not to keep them. The maxim, yet again, has the trappings of a hypothetical form (since it refers to the goal of obtaining money), but can perhaps be restated in categorical form. In any case, if I were to universalise the maxim, then I will see 'straight away' that in the world where everyone follows it, the practice of promises will disappear. Well, where is the contradiction? The reading I favour is that the maxim, now converted into a universal law, refers to giving promises, while at the same time its validity implies (in practice) the disappearance of any promise. I.e. the observance of this promise-creating law would lead to the disappearance of promises. Hmmmm.

Puzzles. It has to be noted that many trivial maxims ('I will always wear blue hats') and many ostensibly evil maxims ('I will insult Chinese people if I have an opportunity to do so') can pass the tests provided by FUL and FLN. There is no apparent contradiction involved in generalising them. The case of trivial maxims can be explained by saying that FUL and FLN are meant to provide necessary conditions. That is, if a maxim is morally significant, then it must pass the generalisation tests. However, if it passes generalisation tests, this is no guarantee that it is morally significant. Another response is that for evaluating the moral value of maxims we must consider also their opposites. The maxim 'No one should ever wear blue hats' also passes the generalisation tests. Both of them are permissible, and because of that, both of them are also morally neutral.

It is more difficult to see what is wrong with ostensibly evil, yet universalisable, maxims. One way out here is to search for a more basic maxim underlying my more specific maxim and then try to fail it with FUL and FLN. In this instance it will be 'I will insult people'.

Finally, there are maxims that are ostensibly innocent, yet not universalisable. For instance, the maxim 'I will buy gold and never sell it.' So we have maxims that do not violate any *moral* law, but still cannot be coherently willed as universal laws.

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