

TEXT MESSAGE : Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals

The sections below come from Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals. He gives 4 examples of Categorical Imperatives showing how universal law can be applied

Kant on Suicide

In the extract below Kant explains that it would be that suicide would be a contradiction of universal law –as our valuing of our life would be leading us to end our life

“A man who has been brought by a series of troubles to the point of despair and of weariness with life still has his reason sufficiently to ask himself: ‘Wouldn't it be contrary to my duty to myself to take my own life?’ Now he asks: ‘Could the maxim of my action in killing myself become a universal law of nature?’ Well, here is his maxim: For love of myself, I make it my principle to cut my life short when prolonging it threatens to bring more troubles than satisfactions.

So the question is whether this principle of self-love could become a universal law of nature. If it did, that would be a nature that had a law according to which a single feeling created a life-affirming push and also led to the destruction of life itself; and we can see at a glance that such a ‘nature’ would contradict itself, and so couldn't be a nature. So the maxim we are discussing couldn't be a law of nature, and therefore would be utterly in conflict with the supreme principle of duty.”

Kant on False Promises

In this extract Kant argues that the breaking of a promise is self-contradictory as the universalisation of promise breaking would lead to an end of the idea of promises

“Another man sees himself being driven by need to borrow money. He realizes that no-one will lend to him unless he firmly promises to repay it at a certain time, and he is well aware that he wouldn't be able to keep such a promise. He is disposed to make such a promise, but he has enough conscience to ask himself: ‘Isn't it improper and opposed to duty to relieve one's needs in that way?’

*If he does decide to make the promise, the maxim of his action will run like this: **When I think I need money, I will borrow money and promise to repay it, although I know that the repayment won't ever happen... If my maxim became a universal law, then how would things stand? I can see straight off that it could never hold as a universal law of nature, and must contradict itself.** For if you take a law saying that anyone who thinks he is in need can make any promises he likes without intending to keep them, and make it universal so that **(if) everyone in need does behave in this way**, that would make the promise and the intended purpose of it impossible—no-one would believe what was promised to him but would only laugh at any such performance as a vain pretence.”*

Kant on Neglected talents

In this section Kant moves on to an imperfect duty – the need to develop our talents. A world where no one uses their talents is not self-contradictory as the two maxims above are but it is not a world that any right thinking person would wish to live in. Kant's comment about South Pacific Islanders do not reflect well on him. Given that he never travelled more than 30 miles from Konigsberg, it is unclear what he bases these remarks on.

*“A third finds in himself a talent that could be developed so as to make him in many respects a useful person. But he finds himself in comfortable circumstances, and would rather indulge in pleasure than take the trouble to broaden and improve his fortunate natural gifts. But now he asks **whether his maxim of neglecting his gifts, agreeing as it does with his liking for idle amusement, also agrees with what is called ‘duty’.** He sees that **a system of nature conforming with this law could indeed exist**, with everyone behaving like the Islanders of the south Pacific, letting their talents rust and devoting their lives merely to idleness, indulgence, and baby-making—in short, to pleasure. **But he can't possibly will that this should become a universal law of nature** or that it should be implanted in us by a natural instinct. For, as a rational being, he necessarily wills that all his abilities should be developed, because they serve him and are given to him for all sorts of possible purposes.”*

Kant on Helping Others

A final case considered by Kant is helping others. It is an imperfect duty. We can conceive of a world where no one helps others, but again it is not a world that we could rationally desire

*“A fourth man, for whom things are going well, sees that others (whom he could help) have to struggle with great hardships, and he thinks to himself: What concern of mine is it? Let each one be as happy as heaven wills, or as he can make himself; I won't take anything from him or even envy him; **but I have no desire to contribute to his welfare or help him in time of need.***

***If such a way of thinking were a universal law of nature, the human race could certainly survive...** But although it is possible that that maxim should be a universal law of nature, **it is impossible to will that it do so.** For a will that brought that about would conflict with itself, since instances can often arise in which the person in question would need the love and sympathy of others, and he would have no hope of getting the help he desires, being robbed of it by this law of nature springing from his own will.”*