

Explicating a tension regarding the universalisability of wills in Kant's FUL

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Author's note

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I like Kant's moral philosophy because it contains an explanation of the metaphysics of morals. It also captures one's duties, and equally significantly, captures the totalisation and lostness of ethical dilemmas.

I don't know if I understand Kant right. I haven't even read his entire collection yet. Based on my limited information, this is what I have got, and what I believe to be true.

I really believe this is why Kant said "by your will" because universalisability must be personal, specific, and actionable. I have done well enough for this core course.

Kant's FUL: A tension regarding the universalisability of wills

Regarding his Formula of Universal Law (FUL), what exactly does Kant mean by "will"? Why did he phrase it the way he did? In this essay, I argue FUL points to a significant tension regarding the universalisability of wills. Arguments that seem to challenge FUL are really disagreements about when it is possible to will an action. Thus, this tension is resolvable with proper contextualisation. This is an area contemporary philosophers can expand upon and analyse.

First, I shall explicate Kant's FUL in the context of the Supreme Principle of Morality (SPM). Next, I will object, and then reply to my objection.

Explicating SPM

As FUL logically follows from SPM, I shall discuss SPM.

Kant argues there exists a single moral law that all rational agents must abide by (Kant, 2017, p. 100). He only considers rational agents, rather than animals or beings, because he argues rationality differentiates agents apart from all other things (Kant, 2017, p. 99). Specifically, he argues, "Everything in nature works in accordance with laws. Only a rational being has the power to act in accordance with the idea of laws — that is, in accordance with principles — and thus has a will" (Kant, 2017, p. 99).

In short, he argues for five facts. (1) There exist moral principles, (2) all rational actions are governed by said moral principles, (3) rationality is the means for agents to personally discover said principles, (4) rationality allows us to conform or adhere to said principles, and (5) one requires a will in order to act according to said principles.

Kant argues that only rational agents are governed under moral principles. This is because an animal with no rational capacity can only react to the world. It cannot step back and evaluate the reasons why it acted or reacted, and thus conceptualise a framework of reasons. If a dog perceives something as a threat, its natural inclination, thus reaction, would

be to snarl and bite without much hesitation. Therefore, dogs are not up for deontic assessment under Kant's theory because they merely react to stimulus, rather than reasons.

This is not to say humans are unable to react to stimuli, or that it is wrong to react to stimuli. Rather, rational agents have two distinct capacities: the capacity to react to stimulus due to natural inclinations, and the capacity to act according to reasons. Rational agents are not held "hostage" to their biological nature entirely.

The distinction between action and reaction is significant. Kant argues that because some actions are available for deontic assessment, the actor of said actions is up for deontic assessment. Thus, because we are rational, because we are able to step back and evaluate ourselves, we must. To do otherwise is irrational. Kant argues that stepping back and evaluating is the rational action. The negation of that, the refusal of that, is irrational. To ignore the nature of reality is to be irrational. As we are capable of facing up to the truth, we must.

SPM is the categorical imperative (Kant, 2017, p. 115). It is named the categorical imperative because (1) it is an imperative, i.e. it is a statement containing the word "must". It is an order, whose authority is derived from (2) its self-evident nature. No rational agent can ignore SPM without being irrational.

This is where Kant's universalisability resides. Due to the categorical aspect of SPM, universalisability is necessary.

Explicating FUL

Kant's FUL is: "Act as though the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature." (Kant, 2017, p. 103).

I argue a tension lies in Kant's phrasing of FUL. He is deliberate and purposeful. He specifically said, "by your will". This argues SPM is addressed to every agent personally.

Why is this so? As SPM is universal, discoverable, and self-evident, why did he choose to phrase the truth in relation to us, rather than as an objective fact?

One argument is because SPM is, metaphysically, agent-specific. This means that every agent requires the means to act according to SPM in order to be an agent. If one does not have the means to do so, one is simply not a Kantian agent.

Thus, a valid maxim is required to fulfil two criteria: (1) being will-able by me, (2) being will-able by everyone in the same circumstance as I, with the same (perfect) rational capacity, and with the same powers and beliefs as I. That is, if everyone were a perfect moral agent, everyone must come to the same, correct, deontic evaluation when in the same, exact, circumstances.

Is this really the case?

Explicating a scenario

Consider two people: Athirah and Caleb. Both are students, both have parents. Both face the following maxims:

1. Duty to self
 - 1.1. I have a duty to myself. I should live life in ways that are favourable to me.
2. Duty to parents
 - 2.1. I have a duty to my parents because I am their child. I should take care of them.

Caleb does not mind taking care of his parents because he is happy with doing so. He believes that his life is not "held hostage" by his parents' needs. Rather, he believes that it is part of his worthy life to both take care of his parents by keeping them company, and by living life however he wants to. That is, he makes time for his duty as a child and his duty to

himself. He fulfils his duty to himself by living a fulfilling social and academic life. Thus, Caleb fulfils both duties his way.

Athirah does mind taking care of her parents because she feels she is "held hostage" by her parents' needs. While she does derive happiness by keeping her parents company, she feels that it is out of her expense. She feels that she is trading off her life as an independent person to cater to the needs of her parents. Thus, Athirah does not fulfil her duty to her parents, and prioritises her duty to herself.

Who is right? Is one of these duties an incorrect maxim? Are these two maxims deontically mutually exclusive? Is there even a contradiction present within this scenario?

I pose this scenario as an attempt to capture a dilemma. When faced with two options: (1) living life however you want to, versus (2) living life as a dutiful child, people have different reactions. Some argue that these two options are compatible, while others argue it is mutually exclusive. Are we beholden to no one but ourselves? Does rationality guide us to a universalisable deontic evaluation in this scenario?

Ruling out irrelevant responses

Before I evaluate the above scenario, I would like to rule out irrelevant responses.

I pose this scenario as a consideration of universalisability. Not every scenario has a "solution", i.e. a deontically correct option. This fact is not a challenge to FUL. After all, FUL remains true even in the face of ethical dilemmas. In ethical dilemmas, when there is no solution, there can be no will-able action. Universalisability is an impossibility in unresolvable scenarios. Thus, to claim ethical dilemmas as credible challenges against FUL is illogical.

Weaknesses of wills are also irrelevant deontic challenges to FUL. If Athirah does have a weakness of will, if she is unable to will the correct action in a scenario, it is her transgression, not FUL's. Only in a scenario where every rational agent is unable to will the

evidently correct solution will said scenario become a valid challenge to FUL. Having considered FUL for half of this course, I am unable to present such a significant scenario because I can think of no such possibility. This does not rule out the existence of the said scenario, although I suspect it really does not exist.

The lack of power is also an irrelevant deontic challenge. If it is not in one's power to act, even if an agent is rational and in the "right" circumstances, it is impossible to act correctly.

Another irrelevant deontic challenge is scenarios that are specific to one and only one agent. Suppose everyone in the above scenario wills take care of their parents. Suppose Athirah wills the opposite. Suppose both actions are correct. However, by some idiosyncrasy of Athirah, her action becomes correct even though every other agent in existence has chosen the correct, and the alternative. This is an irrelevant challenge because her idiosyncrasies are not metaphysically specific to her. It is illogical to argue that there exist idiosyncrasies that are agent-specific and agent-exclusive. Thus, her idiosyncrasies are not specific to her per se. Rather, if everyone had the same idiosyncrasies as Athirah, then everyone must will Maxim 1: Duty to self, just as Athirah has.

There are more irrelevant responses, but I shall move on to one I argue is relevant.

Explicating the form of a valid counter example to FUL

Before I evaluate the above scenario, I shall explicate what a valid attack against FUL will look like.

In a valid counter example, there is a divergence of rational wills. That is, agents can arrive at conflicting verdicts while maintaining perfect rationality. For example, fifty per cent of rational agents choose option A, while fifty per cent of rational agents choose option B. Both sides have equally sound arguments. Both sides argue, soundly, that their option is required. Both sides disagree on what should be done.

This "valid" counter example seems to be a logical impossibility. After all, what a valid criticism demands of itself is a logical impossibility of material implication.

This "valid" counter example is resolvable, as a rational agent can step back from both options, recognise the logical flow of both options, and come to the main deontic verdict of both being permissible instead of required and conflicting.

Thus, a credible challenge must avoid this "stepping back", while maintaining logical validity, which is impossible.

Evaluating the scenario: No possible conflicting maxims

Athirah argues her verdict is correct because she is acting according to another maxim: "I have a duty to myself, within reason".

If this maxim is true, the dilemma evaporates, as both Athirah and Caleb are operating under the same maxim. They are both merely confused about what maxims they are truly acting under.

Confusion aside, the tension still remains. It seems that within specific domains of action and circumstances, there can be two conflicting maxims, with two conflicting deontic verdicts, with both verdicts being at odds with each other.

The following is the generalisation of the scenario above.

There exist two duties. Both are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are compatible under most circumstances. Under specific circumstances, the duties are at odds with each other. Universalisability remains intact because either (1) one of these duties is "wrong" under the "right" circumstances, or (2) there exists no right action. Thus, the scenario is not a valid challenge to FUL.

Thus, under (2), Athirah is unable to will the "right" action because it is impossible to will the right action. It is not a weakness of will. Rather, it is an impossible will.

Conclusion

Kant's deliberate phrasing perfectly captures an agent's appropriate response in ethical dilemmas. His specific phrasing of "by your will" in FUL captures the required capacity to will. Thus, there exists no credible challenge against FUL because people are either mistaken about what constitutes deontic relevant challenges, or because they are mistaken about the metaphysics of morals. SPM and FUL do not say "Every scenario has a deontic verdict." Rather, both SPM and FUL point towards what the deontic verdict is, under deontically evaluable scenarios.

References

Kant, I. (2017). Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals. In Cahn, S. M. & Forcehimes, A. (Eds.), *Principles of Moral Philosophy: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Normative Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780190491000.

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