

On Kant's Maxim of Suicide and Perfect Duty
in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*

IB Extended Essay

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Abstract

In his *The Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant discusses his concept of duty. He distinguishes between perfect and imperfect duties through his illustrations which serve as examples of maxims that violate perfect and imperfect duties. Is Kant's maxim of suicide against perfect duty? This essay discusses the differences between perfect and imperfect duties, establishing the criteria by which to judge Kant's specific maxim of suicide. This maxim is then examined in detail to identify the assumptions and difficulties associated with it. This essay then establishes the reasons as to why the maxim of suicide is not contrary to perfect duty and continues to investigate whether the maxim opposes imperfect duty. This essay concludes that Kant's maxim of suicide is not against perfect duty but is against imperfect duty. Finally, the question of whether the distinction between perfect and imperfect duty is a useful one is posed.

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On Kant's Maxim of Suicide and Perfect Duty in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*

Introduction

In his *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant discusses the application of his supreme principle of morality (the Categorical Imperative) through his distinction between perfect and imperfect duty. In his illustrations, Kant uses a maxim regarding suicide to exemplify what perfect duty would entail. Is Kant's maxim of suicide against perfect duty? This essay will examine this specific maxim in detail to judge whether it clashes with Kant's criteria that determine perfect duty. Upon the demonstration that this is not the case, this essay will examine whether Kant's maxim goes against a duty of another sort - an imperfect duty. Shown to be so, the further question of whether the distinction between perfect duty and imperfect duty is a viable one will be considered.

Distinguishing between perfect and imperfect duty

In *The Groundwork* Kant defines duty as "the necessity to act out of reverence for the law";¹ the law being his Categorical Imperative which states that one must "act only according to that maxim through which [one] can at the same time will that it should become a universal law".² Kant's basic idea is that imperfectly rational beings (those who are subject to temptations) ought to follow the objective principles of duty in order to act morally. Fully rational beings on the other hand are not subject to duty because their will

¹ Kant, p. 68

² Kant, p. 88

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accords perfectly with the moral law of the Categorical Imperative. Thus duty is the means, and the only means, through which imperfectly rational beings can act morally. Morally good actions must be motivated by duty, not merely accord with it. This note is significant because it distinguishes a morally good action from an amoral action simply by examining the motives. For example, sharing ice cream with a sibling would be a morally good action only if it is motivated by duty. In other words, one would act on the maxim "I ought to share my ice cream with a younger sibling" which accords with the Categorical Imperative and is therefore a duty. If the action is motivated by the desire to get rid of one's ice cream, then it is not a morally good action even though it accords with duty. Morally good actions are therefore motivated by duty (reasoned with the Categorical Imperative) and not inclination. Moral reasoning is guided by what Kant dubs "the will" of a rational being. When judging whether maxims accord to duty, one must be careful to keep in mind that "the will" Kant describes does not arise out of inclination but is rather a rational force that guides the judgement of moral action. Some may argue that the "will" is a natural desire to act out of reason and is thus an instinct in itself. But even if that is the case, the distinction remains as the actions that the will motivates will still be guided by reason and not some other emotional impetus. It is important to distinguish what is meant by "instinct", "inclination", "desire", and "emotion" in this essay. All these terms are used interchangeably in this essay to describe elements of what Kant calls the "sensible world"³. Apart from the will which is grounded in reason and the "intelligible world"⁴, Kant believes rational beings are influenced and tempted by elements of the "sensible world" which largely depend on input from one's

³ Kant, p. 119.

⁴ This term refers to a standpoint that a rational being takes when he or she acts out of reason. Kant, p. 119.

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senses. These often present themselves as contrary to reason (for example acting as temptations) and in this essay their reference serves to indicate a contrast to a reason. Kant believes that while a rational being must acknowledge the influence of the sensible world, reason is what should guide action.

Kant distinguishes between four types of duty: perfect duties towards the self and towards others, and imperfect duties towards the self and towards others. For the purposes of this essay, the important distinction here is the one between perfect and imperfect duty. In *The Groundwork* Kant does not explicitly define his notions of perfect and imperfect duty, but rather indicates in a footnote that he reserves a detailed distinction for a future *Metaphysic of Morals*.⁵ Nonetheless, through his illustrations and brief footnote, Kant portrays a perfect duty as one “which allows no exception in the interests of inclination”⁶ while an imperfect duty leaves some leeway for inclination. For example the statement “I ought to volunteer my time for the needy in my community” illustrates an imperfect duty because there is still a choice of whether to volunteer in a soup kitchen, or at a homeless shelter, or elsewhere. In other words the choice of how to carry out the maxim holds room for inclination. Perhaps a much more important distinction arises when examining whether individual maxims adhere to perfect or imperfect duty. If a maxim is contrary to perfect duty then its universal application would involve a logical contradiction. To borrow an example from Jonathan Harrison, consider the maxim “I make it a rule to be first in every line”. It is impossible to apply this rule universally, because not everyone can be first in line or the definition of line would no

⁵ Kant, p. 89

⁶ Kant, p. 89

longer be viable.⁷ Some will point out that this is a very simplistic representation of a logical contradiction in a universally applied maxim and that it would be much more difficult to apply the same method to more complicated maxims. This is a difficulty that Kant himself faces when illustrating that his maxim of suicide is contrary to perfect duty.

Justification of the approach

Perhaps it is important here to justify the analysis and concern over one specific illustration. Critics may point out that the central concern of this essay with a specific illustration is unjustified since providing examples and practical applications of the Categorical Imperative was not one of Kant's aims in *The Groundwork*. One scholar, Barbara Herman has even pointed out that Kant's Illustrations ought to be "a footnote to *The Groundwork*".⁸ However, the illustrations provided do not only demonstrate but also clarify and implicitly define the distinctions between the various types of duty. Determining one's duties is essential to applying and meaningfully discussing Kant's ethical theory. Even though Kant's ethics is primarily grounded in reason, the maxims tested against the Categorical Imperative ultimately stem from empirical knowledge. There is no way to deduce specific duties from the supreme moral principle. It is unavoidable for Kant to address this empirical aspect of his ethical theory, and he chooses to do so at least to an extent in *The Groundwork*. Because his illustrations are used at least in part to define the distinctions between duties, they must stand on their own. That is the stance this essay takes in analyzing the illustration of suicide on its own, much to the advice of scholars like Jonathan Harrison who suggests that "each one [of the

⁷ Harrison, p. 232

⁸ Herman, Conference Panel Member

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examples] must be considered independently of both the others and of Kant's remarks about his own programme".⁹

An analysis of Kant's maxim of suicide and the concept of self-love

In *The Groundwork* Kant puts forth the following maxim: "From self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life if its continuance threatens more evil than it promises pleasure".¹⁰ This is the maxim Kant uses as an example of a subjective principle that is contrary to perfect duty, as he claims that it "cannot possibly hold as a universal law of nature"¹¹ (i.e. it cannot be applied universally). Kant claims that a contradiction arises because the purpose of self-love is to preserve life, and yet in the above maxim self-love is used as a reason to end life. The concept of self-love cannot both further and destroy life. In order to critically analyze Kant's argument, it is imperative to examine the concepts of "self-love" and "universal law of nature" in more depth.

Kant defines "self-love" as a principle "whose function is to stimulate the furtherance of life".¹² This statement holds various assumptions and interpretations. Perhaps the clearest interpretation of Kant's definition is that self-love is equivalent to self-preservation and thus its goal is to prevent the ending of one's life. Pursuing the simplest interpretation devoids the argument of unnecessary complications that would hurt Kant's argument. Certainly one can claim that "self-love" refers to a pursuit of one's happiness or that it motivates character improvement to further the quality of life. But those interpretations would deter from Kant's goal to establish a motive that goes against

⁹ Harrison, p. 228

¹⁰ Kant, p. 89

¹¹ Kant, p. 89

¹² Kant, p. 89

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the action contained in his maxim. Kant's biggest assumption when defining self-love as self-preservation is that adopting a principle of self-preservation necessarily prevents one from willing to end his or her life. This is where Kant's ethics ultimately runs into problems with empirical knowledge, for he fails to address how self-preservation is incompatible with the will to end one's life. He assumes that self-preservation is unconditional, or in other words he assumes that someone would always choose life over death. Some will naturally argue that it is not an assumption that Kant makes, but rather it is a definition that he establishes - that self-preservation always pushes one to choose life over death. Yet, perhaps Kant's definition should not be taken at face value. There may come a situation where suffering for example outweighs the instinct for preservation.

The maxim's relation to perfect duty

A point worth considering is whether self-preservation, or self-love as Kant describes it, is a rational motive or one driven by instinct. Kant places a lot of emphasis on actions that are driven by reason, and holds reason to be above mere inclination. If self-preservation is taken to be an instinct, one not driven by reason, then perhaps it is a false motive to which a rational being should not succumb. This would then discredit the alleged contradiction in the maxim because a rational agent would be able to ignore the first part of the maxim and act only according to the second part. For example, consider the application of Kant's maxim if a person, Ray, is placed in a very tough life situation where he is suffering from a terminal illness. Ray's instinct for preservation may tell him that life is more promising than death, yet as a rational being he reasons that death outweighs the benefit of continued suffering. He thus chooses to ignore his instinct of

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self-preservation (“self-love” according to Kant) and chooses to act on the second part of Kant’s maxim. He decides to end his life because “its continuance threatens more evil than it promises pleasure”.¹³ The application of this maxim yields no logical contradiction.

Some may argue that even if self-love is an instinct (and Kant himself refers to it as a “feeling”¹⁴), this would not be enough ground to dismiss it as a false motive. One’s motives can be based on feelings, for example, so long as the actions accord with reason. This argument, however, contradicts Kant’s stance that moral actions must be motivated by duty, and in turn the reasoning behind the duty. Even if self-love as an instinct powered by something other than reason (such as emotion) was a solid motive for the maxim, it could be overpowered by a duty to end suffering, as was Ray’s case in the above example. Some may argue that the second part of Kant’s maxim is also grounded in instinct rather than reason. Perhaps it is so, partly because “evil” and “pleasure” are generally very subjective. This brings to the surface the problem of how to judge one instinct over another. However, the goal of this argument is to show that if either the first or second part of Kant’s maxim is not grounded in reason, then his maxim yields no logical contradiction and is thus not opposed to perfect duty if applied universally.

A closer examination of the specific maxim also reveals another way to get around the contradiction that Kant claims exists. By deconstructing the maxim, one can see that the structure is threefold. There is a motive (“from self-love”), an action (“I make it my principle to shorten my life”), and a condition (“if its continuance threatens more

¹³ Kant, p. 89.

¹⁴ Kant, p. 89.

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evil than it promises pleasure”) component to it. As Jonathan Harrison has pointed out,¹⁵ removing the motive still allows the maxim to stand thus: “I make it make my principle to shorten my life if its continuance threatens more evil than it promises pleasure”. There is no inherent contradiction in this latter version of the maxim. This pushes one to consider whether the motive Kant has included is even necessary or creates any difference when his maxim is applied universally. The motive is independent of the conditions. Kant generally disregards the motives of maxims, usually judging the action contained within the maxim rather than the reasons that pushed a person to act upon the maxim. Maxims, as subjective principles, are measured against the Categorical Imperative in order to determine their applicability rather than in comparison to their motives. Kant attempts to create a contradiction within the constructs of his maxim rather than to create a contradiction in its universal applicability. The motive in Kant’s maxim is shown to be both an object of inclination that may be ignored by a rational being and a rather inessential element to the maxim. Thus, one can conclude that the universal application of Kant’s maxim would not yield a logical contradiction and is thus not opposed to perfect duty.

The maxim’s opposition to imperfect duty

Now that it has been shown that it is possible to apply Kant’s maxim universally, it is essential to consider whether his maxim can be willed to apply universally and thus accord with imperfect duty. Recall that if the maxim cannot be willed to apply universally, then it would violate imperfect duty. The nature of the will here plays a

¹⁵ Harrison, p. 233.

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particularly important role in passing judgement on this proposition. The will of a rational being as explained previously is at the centre of Kant's ethical theory. The "good will"¹⁶ as Kant describes it is the only thing good in itself and is the only medium through which moral actions can be conceived. The will is the ultimate judge in whether actions accord to the Categorical Imperative. When one considers Kant's maxim, one must look at whether a perfectly rational being would will its universal application. In order to judge whether this universal adoption of the maxim is desirable, one must look at whether it furthers "systematic harmony of purposes in the individual and in the human race"¹⁷ as professor H. J. Paton suggests. Some may be eager to jump to the conclusion that testing the maxim in this manner suggests a consequentialist approach, yet Kant's ethics is far from that. Testing Kant's maxim does not involve weighing the consequences of what would happen if everyone adopts Kant's maxim. It is about whether a rational being would theoretically wish that everyone adopt his or her maxim. The distinction is very fine, and some argue that indeed Kant's ethics ultimately rests upon empirical knowledge of human nature. However, this is not necessarily so. The difference can be clearly illustrated by the following example: consider the maxim "I will donate ten dollars to a local charity". When deciding as a rational agent whether one would will or ought to will this maxim, one must look not at whether the consequences would be negative or positive if everyone was to give ten dollars to charity. Rather one must consider whether or not one would wish that everyone donated ten dollars regardless of the consequences, be it negative or positive. The assumption in making such a judgement is that the rational, good will of all other beings acting upon the maxim would be the same as the will of the

¹⁶ Kant, p. 61.

¹⁷ Kant, p. 31. Note that the reference is to Paton's analysis section and not the primary text of *The Groundwork*.

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agent considering the maxim in the first place. This distinction is important because it avoids several problems when considering Kant's maxim of suicide.

The central question that surfaces when addressing the problem of why Kant's maxim of suicide is against imperfect duty is the question of why a rational agent can't will the maxim. Some arguments may claim that the adoption of Kant's maxim would result in mass suicide if it is to be adopted universally. This hasty conclusion is certainly unfounded because Kant's maxim is conditioned. The maxim would only push people to commit suicide if their lives offer more suffering than pleasure, and thus would be happier dead. Arguably, such individuals would be in the minority. However, as J. Kemp points out, "it does not matter how many weary people commit suicide - it is as wrong for one as for a million".¹⁸ Kemp certainly has a point in that one cannot appeal simply to the effects or consequences the maxim would have on the population or on suicide rates. What must make the maxim un-willable must be grounded in motive rather than consequence.

There are two ways in which the maxim could be shown to be impossible to will from a perfectly rational being. One must either show that someone's life is worth preserving unconditionally (as Kant seems to argue implicitly) or one must show that taking one's life because of more suffering than pleasure is irrational. The latter route seems to hold more promise. As a rational agent one is likely to recognize the intrinsic worth of a will. Kant himself places a lot of emphasis on the worth of one's will stating that one should never violate the autonomy of another rational being. An interesting point arises here. If one is to never treat a will as a means to an end, then perhaps to take one's own life is to violate one's own autonomous will. Kant makes it explicit with his Formula

¹⁸ Kemp, p. 251.

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of Autonomy¹⁹ that one should not under any circumstance violate the autonomy of someone else's will as well as his or her own will. Then it becomes fairly evident why no rational being would will Kant's maxim of suicide - no rational agent would will to violate his or her autonomy. Some may argue that willing to violate one's autonomy is against perfect duty. However, this argument fails because there is no logical contradiction that would show opposition to perfect duty since it is certainly possible for a rational being to commit suicide. But no perfectly rational being would will to commit suicide, because to do so would be to violate a central postulate of Kant's ethics - the Formula of Autonomy. Thus suicide would be contrary to imperfect duty because its universal application cannot be rationally willed.

The difficulty with the above argument is that it rests on the assumption that suicide violates one's autonomy. It is arguably true that the destruction of a will violates its autonomy because it can no longer act freely (it cannot act at all). However, one can argue that suicide treats the will not only as a means to an end (the ending of suffering for example) but also as an end in itself. One may decide to take one's life not only because it would end suffering but also because one feels that the will has the right to terminate its existence if it so wishes. Otherwise, the will is in a way forced to continue existing and its autonomy is violated in that way. Some may view suicide as a right to all human beings, and to suggest that it is intrinsically immoral would yield a sense of violation in some individuals who would feel morally forced to live rather than take their own life. Ultimately, the judgement as to whether a rational being ought not to take his or her own life rests with the judgement as to whether the existence of a will is always preferable to

¹⁹ Formula of Autonomy states: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end." Kant, p. 95

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its death. Certainly some may argue that the will should have the right to wish the end of its own existence, yet it is important to consider whether that belief is motivated by reason or external emotions and instincts. Here is where Kant's specific maxim would come into play. A rational being would likely hold the continuing of the existence of the will above the instinct to end suffering. If most people adopt the maxim to commit suicide when in more pain than pleasure, they would be subordinating the existence of their wills to the instincts of pain and pleasure. Some critics will point out that there is nothing wrong with taking a hedonistic approach to life. But from a Kantian perspective (one which places an emphasis on rationality and the moral supremacy of the good will) no perfectly rational being would will the adoption of a maxim that subordinates the will to instincts. Thus one has an imperfect duty to abstain from Kant's maxim of suicide. An important question that arises here is whether one has an imperfect duty to abstain from Kant's specific maxim or from maxims regarding suicide in general. As has been shown through this argument, one must look at individual maxims closely in order to determine whether they oppose perfect or imperfect. This essay will not generalize that all maxims regarding suicide are against imperfect duty, because that is not the aim and such generalizations regarding maxims require more evidence than has been presented here. The aim was to show that Kant's specific maxim opposes imperfect duty.

The merit in distinguishing between perfect and imperfect duty

Now that Kant's maxim has been shown to violate imperfect duty but not perfect duty, it is worthwhile to consider whether the distinction between perfect and imperfect duty holds much merit. Kant's ethical theory is often very difficult to apply to

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everyday situations, as it requires individuals to judge their maxims against the Categorical Imperative in order to determine their moral value. This could be a daunting task particularly because Kant's ethics does not follow rigid rules, but rather relies on the judgment of the will of the rational being. Having a set of maxims that one knows certainly accord with perfect or imperfect duty could prove to be pragmatic when adopting Kant's ethics. Many other ethical doctrines have axiomatic rules that facilitate the application of the ethical theory (for example, the Ten Commandments). Yet distinguishing between perfect and imperfect duty in Kant's case does not aid the process that a rational being needs to undergo in order to judge the morality of an action. The universalization of a maxim must always be considered when judging. But the distinction between perfect and imperfect duty perhaps makes a point about the hierarchy of duties. Kant never justifies why he structures his distinction of duties in this manner, nor does he say whether perfect duties are to be held (morally and otherwise) above imperfect duties. When a conflict of duties arises (a common difficulty with Kant's ethics) ought one to follow perfect duties before imperfect duties? Kant states that perfect duties do not leave room for inclination whereas imperfect do, and perhaps the distinction does help in judging the moral worth of duties but Kant fails to make this explicit.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to show through analysis of both the components and assumptions that Kant's maxim of suicide is not against perfect duty as he attempts to illustrate. His failure to make explicit the concept of "self-love" as well as his failure to defend it as a motive allow the maxim's universal applicability to become feasible and

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thus the maxim accords with perfect duty. However, one's imperative to preserve autonomy of one's will and not to succumb to instinct demonstrates that Kant's maxim is against imperfect duty, as no perfectly rational agent can will its universal adoption. The argument reveals the difficulties that arise when distinguishing between perfect and imperfect duty, even when specifically discussing only one maxim. The usefulness of the distinction between types of duty is questionable as ultimately the supreme principle of morality is what judges the moral worth of an action. Duty acts as a moral guideline to a rational being and perhaps its real merit is contained within its overall idea rather than its subdivisions. Kant's maxim of suicide may violate or accord with certain duties, but ultimately the vital thing to recognize is that it is not a maxim that a rational being should act upon. Perhaps the practical use of the concept of duty is more important than its theoretical subdivisions.

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