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*Kant and Meaning: What the Categorical Imperative Means for Special Obligations*

The normative claims in ethics are made based on what we value. The meaning we find in life will also be based on what we value. Thus, if a moral theory includes normative claims that are not consistent with the pursuit of a meaningful life; this indicates a problem in the theory. Such a problem exists in Kant’s moral theory. Drawing on Susan Wolf’s argument for reasons of love I claim that within the framework of the categorical imperative, there is no room for special obligations, which are a valuable and meaningful aspect of our lives. After considering a possible response that special obligations are accounted for within Kant’s theory, I will conclude that they cannot be truly contained within a Kantian system without losing the meaning that gives them normative force in the first place.

Kant discusses two kinds of imperatives; the hypothetical and the categorical. The hypothetical imperative is an imperative toward some end; one must will the means toward that end but it is hypothetical because only when willing the end must one will the means. Giving up the end is all it takes to rid ourselves of this principle. For example; if I want to build a house, I must will the means. This might be to hire a contractor, buy a piece of land, or go out myself and buy hammer, nails, and wood. It is an imperative; I *must* do these things if I am to build a house. But note that as soon as I decide I do not want to build a house I am no longer required to buy a hammer and nails, hire a contractor, or complete any of the other necessary steps toward the end of building a house. The categorical imperative is not dependent on ends. It requires action for its own
sake and not for the sake of an end. Thus, the kind of imperative it is necessitates that it is
a law always and not just when I decide to take up some end.

Kant argues that there is just one categorical imperative and it is the formula of
universal law; “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the
same time will that it become a universal law” (Kant 37). It makes sense that the
categorical imperative would yield a law that is universal in nature since it is not
contingent on some particular end. Since it must be adhered to at all times, universality
naturally follows.

With just one law, it may seem as if Kant does not provide any content for his
moral theory, but Kant believes the formula of universal law does yield content. By
considering the possibility of universalizing the maxims for one’s behaviors, the morality
or immorality of the action will be revealed in every case. There are two kinds of
contradictions to look out for which, if present, show the action is immoral. If the maxim
cannot even be imagined as a universal law, there is a contradiction in conception. The
second kind of contradiction is if the maxim can be imagined as a universal law but still
cannot be willed as a universal law. This is called a contradiction in the will. Two types
of duties are derived from using the formula of universal law; perfect and imperfect. The
perfect duties are those which must be observed at all times, in every case. The example
of the lying promise yields a perfect duty; one has always in every case a duty to honesty,
or not to make lying promises. Imperfect duties are also obligatory, but not in every
possible situation. The example of mutual aid yields an imperfect duty; one must
contribute to the welfare of others at times but not in every individual opportunity that
presents itself (Korsgaard 84).
Kant argues that all morally good actions will be a result of the agent acting from duty and duty alone. Kant uses various examples to show why consideration outside duty cannot be used to determine moral action. His example of the merchant with fair prices shows why we cannot rely on the effect of the action to judge moral worth; the merchant keeps his prices fair but it is not out of a duty to what is right. The merchant knows that it is more advantageous for his reputation if he keeps prices fair for everyone, thus his action was out of self-love and not a duty to honesty. Both a duty to honesty and self-love would have achieved the same affect so that cannot be a consideration when determining what is moral. Similarly, the merchant’s inclinations may lead to the action of keeping his prices fair, but it would only show a love for his customers and not a respect for duty (Kant 13). Once the agent’s inclinations and consideration of the effect of the action has been stripped away, only the ‘universal lawfulness’ is left and this is the principle that all moral action will respect (Kant 18).

There are many reasons for taking up Kant’s theory. It captures the intuition that there is more to moral action than right action; the merchant engages in moral action only when he sets fair prices out of duty and not when he does so out of self-love. It also captures our intuition that moral action should be universal. Kant points out that we have this intuition; the success of any individual’s attempt to make an exception for himself depends on the expectation that everyone else will adhere to the maxim. A system with exceptions depends on the universality of the system as a whole (Kant 42). But perhaps one of the most attractive features of Kant’s theory is that is it based on practical rationality. There is something unique about rationality to humans; even animals have
inclinations and can care about their self-interest but only humans have rational judgment.

But while there are many advantageous aspects of Kant’s moral theory, a moral theory should reach deeper than prescribing a code of conduct for behavior. A successful moral theory will indeed determine how we ought to behave, but it will do so based on what we (ought to) value. On Kant’s theory, practical rationality is the most esteemed value, and the prescription for preserving this value is respecting the categorical imperative. I will argue that the problem with Kant’s theory is the normative claim that moral action must always be brought about by motivations with respect to duty. Whether this reflects a problem extending all the way to the primacy Kant places on the underlying value of practical rationality or whether the problem is only with using the categorical imperative is not of concern to me here. I will argue only that the results of the categorical imperative are unacceptable; a moral theory that requires one to defer always to the formula of universal law in moral deliberation does not capture values that ought to be accounted for in a moral theory.

Susan Wolf is one philosopher who has raised this objection. She argues that duty should not always have to win out as the motivating reason behind a moral action. Wolf claims there is another category of reasons called “reasons of love” which are also relevant considerations which can be just as morally obligating as notions of duty. Reasons of love are a combination of subjective attraction with objective value and are separate from the ideas of self-love and duty. On Wolf’s theory of the good, our ability to lead meaningful lives is tied to our ability to act from reasons of love, for which she
claims Kant’s theory cannot account. The capacity for meaningfulness is relevant to a moral theory because of the fact that the moral theory is based on our values. Meaningfulness will derive from the successful pursuit of value, so a moral theory that presents problems for living meaningfully will have problems with the values upon which it is based or somewhere in the transition from value to the normative prescriptions which are supposed to be based on those values.

Let us now consider only those actions motivated by reasons of love that involve those persons in close relationships to us. It is quite possible that objective value and subjective attraction meet in realms other than interpersonal, but for now let us forget those possibilities and only consider those involving our relationships. What Wolf is talking about is special obligations. Specially-obligating relationships are those relationships we are in that generate obligations which are not owed to the population at large, but rather only to particular people or groups of people based on the relationship one has with them. Let us find out what happens when a maxim involving a special obligation is universalized with the example of lending emotional support with the maxim; “From self-love I make it my principle to offer my friends emotional support whenever they are in need of it.” There are no obvious contradictions in universalizing this maxim- it seems that our maxim will pass the test of morality. This seems analogous to mutual aid, so perhaps our special obligations are allowable imperfect duties within the categorical imperative.

However, I argue as Wolf does that this reasoning does not capture the real normative force of our obligation to provide emotional support to our friends. It is not out of self-love that I do it; my obligation to offer my shoulder for a friend to cry on is not
because it contradicts my aim of self-love to will a world in which no one offers their friends emotional support. The meaningfulness of maintaining friendships is lost if that is my reasoning for lending emotional support. It is not out of inclination that I offer my friend this support either; it may be the very last thing I am inclined to do when I am tired, when I grow weary of hearing my friend whine about the same romantic troubles for the third week in a row, or when I have a paper deadline the next morning. Further, if I act from mere inclination, the actual normative force of my friendship is not captured in the way it ought to be. Whether or not I gain enjoyment of playing the sympathetic friend role, I am indeed obligated to do so based on the fact that my friendship contributes to my aim of living a meaningful life. Since living a meaningful life is of value; the very thing normative ethics ought to be preserving, Kant’s theory of the categorical imperative cannot be accepted as it is since it does not preserve this meaning.