

1. 'The principle of universalisability...is not the guaranteed touchstone for all moral decisions but merely the expression of the minimal requirement of consistency' (4/80). – Discuss.

Kant's principle of universalisability follows the notion that whatever you want to do, it should be something anyone is able to do anywhere, that is, universally. It means any action you want to do to someone else is a moral action if you can accept it when another person does the same thing to you. If every person in society can accept a particular action, then it's a moral thing to do.

Kant thinks human beings do not create any object in the world. We just use the object or perceive it in our own way. We translate everything as the way we see the world from our own perspectives. Just like eyeglasses can change our perspective toward the world; the world may be brighter or darker, clearer, or less focused depending on the eyeglasses I wear. Or, to use another analogy, we shape the world just like we choose what kind of cookie-cutter we choose to use when we make cookies. Whatever shape or perspective this world will be, from our perspective, depends on us.

For other philosophers, moral can be the good or the right thing to do. But for Kant, moral is what we 'ought' to do. It's not a good thing in itself nor is it absolute good. Kant considers it as something we ought to do. I ought to pay my debt because I borrowed it and if someone borrowed from me, I would want to be paid back. It is neither right or wrong in itself to pay a debt. Kant is not objectivist or subjectivist, but he uses reason alone to define what is moral, or think about what is moral. It's reasonable to do the same thing you want other people do to you. This abstract concept can cover the whole range of actions.

Socrates believes that virtue should be taught in a practical way by experience or by example, by abstract conceptions or principle. It's easy for us to learn virtue or how to do the good thing by example. I have learned about virtue since I was young. The Buddhism religion gives an example of a moral case in the story of the monk who cut himself to feed hungry crow by with the flesh from his own body. I still remember it now. I also learned not to steal when I was young. My mother would punish me if I stole.

But Kant may disagree with this idea. He thinks we should learn moral concepts from abstract conceptions or principles. But the abstract doesn't go into details of what to do or what not to do. So, it opens wide the possibility to interpret what is moral for any future actions. Does deciding on what is moral depend completely on human free will? The universalisability principle says I should return what I borrow if I want someone who borrows from me to do the same thing. But, like Socrates' analogy, do you really have to return the knife to your crazy friend? The details in this case are not covered by Kant's principle. Perhaps we could say that 95 percent of the time the principle of universalisability should work.

It will be a moral action if it fulfils your duty. I can be a good man if I do my duty and that's it. Do I need to do anything more? Is what is moral limited to doing no more my duty? Don't I have to do a favour if I can do it, even if it is not my duty? This imposes quite a limitation on human action. It sounds like determinism. If a mother's duty is to feed her child, how does that apply in a situation where she can do *more* than just feed her child? What if she can buy

better quality food for her child? Should she only fulfil her basic duty by just finding normal food for the baby? Can't we blame her for not giving her child the best she can? This may be a weakness in Kant's moral universalisability principle as it applies to duty. It can make us focus on minimally fulfilling our duty. Do I have to do the good thing because of it is simply my duty? How about my self-improvement? Isn't it better if I want to do it from my heart? If I love my wife, I should love her because I love her from my heart, but not because it's my duty to do it or it's just the moral thing to do.

Freewill can make this universalisability principle seem weak. The same cause never guarantees the same effect. The man who buys a gun after knowing that his wife sleep with another man may not guarantee the murder case. A rock may have accidentally fallen on his wife's lover's head when the husband came to shoot him. Maybe he changed his mind at the last minute and killed himself instead. The result can vary in different contexts faced with different choices.

I agree, the principle of universalisability can serve as a bed rock for many situations calling for moral judgment. But we still need to deal with the other details or specific contexts in dealing with moral cases that involve the complexity of human nature.