16. Explain the two tests for consistency of natural law and maxim. What two different kinds of duties are illustrated? pp. 4:423-424

Second section: Transition from popular moral philosophy to the metaphysics of morals

There is therefore only a single categorical imperative, and it is this: act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law. Now, if from this one imperative all imperatives of duty can be derived as from their principle, then, even though we leave it unsettled whether what is called duty is not as such an empty concept, we shall at least be able to indicate what we think by it and what the concept means. Since the universality of the law according to which effects happen constitutes that which is actually called nature in the most general sense (according to its form), i.e. the existence of things in so far as it is determined according to universal laws, the universal imperative of duty could also be expressed as follows: so act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature. We shall now enumerate some duties, according to their usual division, into duties to ourselves and to other human beings, into perfect and imperfect duties.\* 1) Someone who feels weary of life because of a series of ills that has grown to the point of hopelessness is still so far in possession of his reason that he can ask himself whether it is not perhaps contrary to a duty to oneself to take one’s own life. Now he tries out: whether the maxim of his action could possibly become a universal law of nature. But his maxim is: from self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life if, when pro- tracted any longer, it threatens more ill than it promises agreeableness. The only further question is whether this principle of self-love could become a universal law of nature. But then one soon sees that a nature whose law it were to destroy life itself by means of the same sensation the function of which it is to impel towards the advancement of life, would contradict itself and would thus not subsist as a nature, hence that that conformity with the conditions of the subject (quite often his ignorance, or his inclinations), and is thus the principle according to which the subject acts; but the law is the objective principle, valid for every rational being, and the principle according to which it ought to act, i.e. an imperative. \* Here one must duly note that I reserve the division of duties entirely for my future Metaphysics of Morals, and that this one here is put forward only as discretionary (to order my examples).14 Further, I here understand by a perfect duty the one that allows of no exception to the advantage of inclination, and then I have not merely external but also internal perfect duties, which runs counter to the use of the word adopted in the schools; but I do not mean to answer for it here, since for my purpose it is all one whether or not one concedes it to me. maxim could not possibly take the place of a universal law of nature, and consequently conflicts entirely with the supreme principle of all duty. 2) Another sees himself pressured by need to borrow money. He knows full well that he will not be able to repay, but also sees that nothing will be lent to him unless he solemnly promises to repay it at a determinate time. He feels like making such a promise; but he still has enough conscience to ask himself: is it not impermissible and contrary to duty to help oneself out of need in such a way? Suppose that he still resolved to do so, his maxim of the action would go as follows: when I believe myself to be in need of money I shall borrow money, and promise to repay it, even though I know that it will never happen. Now this principle of self-love, or of one’s own benefit, is perhaps quite consistent with my whole future well-being, but the question now is: whether it is right? I therefore transform the imposi- tion of self-love into a universal law, and arrange the question as follows: how things would stand if my maxim became a universal law. Now, I then see at once that it could never hold as a universal law of nature and harmonize with itself, but must necessarily contradict itself. For the universality of a law that everyone, once he believes himself to be in need, could promise whatever he fancies with the intention not to keep it, would make the promise and the end one may pursue with it itself impossible, as no one would believe he was being promised anything, but would laugh about any such utterance, as a vain pretense. 3) A third finds in himself a talent that by means of some cultivation could make him a useful human being in all sorts of respects. However, he sees himself in comfortable circumstances and prefers to give himself up to gratification rather than to make the effort to expand and improve his fortunate natural predispositions. Yet he still asks himself: whether his maxim of neglecting his natural gifts, besides its agreement with his propensity to amusement, also agrees with what one calls duty. Now he sees that a nature could indeed still subsist according to such a universal law, even if human beings (like the South Sea Islanders) should let their talents rust and be intent on devoting their lives merely to idleness, amusement, procreation, in a word, to enjoyment; but he cannot possibly will that this become a universal law of nature, or as such be placed in us by natural instinct. For as a rational being he necessarily wills that all capacities in him be developed, because they serve him and are given to himp for all sorts of possible purposes. p “and are given to him” is an addition of the second edition Yet a fourth, who is prospering while he sees that others have to struggle with great hardships (whom he could just as well help), thinks: what’s it to me? May everyone be as happy as heaven wills, or as he can make himself, I shall take nothing away from him, not even envy him; I just do not feel like contributing anything to his well-being, or his assistance in need! Now, certainly, if such a way of thinking were to become a universal law of nature, the human race could very well subsist, and no doubt still better than when everyone chatters about compassion and benevolence, even develops the zeal to perform such actions occasionally, but also cheats wherever he can, sells out the right of human beings, or infringes it in some other way. But even though it is possible that a universal law of nature could very well subsist according to that maxim, it is still impossible to will that such a principle hold everywhere as a law of nature. For a will that resolved upon this would conflict with itself, as many cases can yet come to pass in which one needs the love and compassion of others, and in which, by such a law of nature sprung from his own will, he would rob himself of all hope of the assistance he wishes for himself. These, then, are some of the many actual duties, or at least of what we take to be such, whose divisionq can clearly be seen from the one principle stated above. One must be able to will that a maxim of our action become a universal law: this is as such the canon of judging it morally. Some actions are such that their maxim cannot even be thought without contradiction as a universal law of nature; let alone that one could will that it should become such. In the case of others that inner impossibility is indeed not to be found, but it is still impossible to will that their maxim be elevated to the universality of a law of nature, because such a will would contradict itself. It is easy to see that the first conflicts with strict or narrower (unrelenting) duty, the second only with wider (meritorious) duty, and thus that all duties, as far as the kind of obligation (not the object of their action) is concerned, have by these examples been set out completely in their dependence on the one principle. If we now attend to ourselves in every transgression of a duty, we find that we actually do not will that our maxim should become a universal law, since that is impossible for us, but that its opposite should rather generally q Both the first and the second original edition have Abteilung (division). Editors and translators since the nineteenth century, including Mary Gregor, tend to substitute Ableitung (“derivation”), but note that Kant has presented a division of duties that is meant to be evident from the above principle, i.e. the fourfold application of the law-of-nature formulation, further explained in the present paragraph.