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Moral Decisions amongst Kantian Agents

Introduction

Moral decisions may be divided into one of two classes: decisions involving an agent alone and those involving an agent and one or more other agents. For the first class, the rational Kantian agent reflects upon a maxim of action and its affect upon herself. The determination of the morality of the maxim depends upon her responsibility to herself as a rational agent. She determines the morality of her maxim by deciding whether it can be universalized. In these situations, the agent has control of both the decision making and the maxim of action. Examples of such decisions are whether or not to develop one=s talents, to maintain one=s health, and, in the extreme, to commit suicide. Such moral decisions are relatively infrequent in the course of an agent's life especially if they have are major impact on oneself.

The second class of moral decisions, those directly involving others, tends to occur more frequently. For such decisions the rational agent judges the morality of the contemplated action by its effect on herself and others. The judgment is more difficult because the agent may have little control over the actions of the others involved. The agent may lack knowledge salient to the morality of the decision because some of the circumstances may be known only to the others. Examples of actions that may involve such moral decisions are loans, beneficence, joint ventures, personal commitments to others (e.g. marriage), etc.

Kant=s approach to morality in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (GMM) and in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (CPR) focuses on the first class of moral decisions. When the second class of moral decisions is considered, the emphasis is on the moral decision making of one of the agents. There is little recognition of interaction of the maxims of the participants and the concomitant effect on the morality of their joint venture.

This paper will examine a subset of moral decisions of the second class: transactions involving two agents. In these transactions, which are frequent in human interactions, two agents agree to a joint venture in which the ends of the two agents are inter-dependant. The centerpiece of this paper is the K-Completeness Theorem, which is a logical consequence of Kant's moral system. The theorem states that a transaction places an additional moral responsibility on each agent as specified by:

> *If each agent in a transaction independently determines her maxim of action to be moral by the Categorical Imperative (CI) procedure, then each agent is obligated to ensure: (1) both his and his counter-party=s maxims are moral and (2) the means within her control that both she and her counter-party employ to implement the transaction are moral.*

The term Acomplete@ is motivated by the intuition that a transaction may be considered complete if both agents agree to each other=s terms and consider each other moral. In such a situation, the major elements of a successful transaction are in place. A K-Complete transaction is moral in the Kantian sense. The next section of this paper provides a formal proof of this theorem.

The paper will hold that Kant does not adequately consider the extended obligation that is a consequence of his moral system in GMM. GMM does not sufficiently analyze the moral problems inherent in transactions between agents, and does not recognize the extended moral obligations of agents in a transaction. Although, the examples in GMM and CPR introduce situations of relevance to the morality of joint actions, the analysis of extended morality in these situations is ignored by Kant. The paper will also argue that the criticism is mitigated because both GMM and CPR adumbrate *some* of the issues of morality in a joint action and therefore the K-Completeness Theorem. Kant discusses these issues in passing but does not draw them together in a coherent analysis. Finally, the paper will briefly examine Kant's recognition of the problem of extended obligations and the need for a moral community in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. (RBMR) The paper will indicate that generalization of K-Completeness and mathematical graph theory is suggestive of Kant's approach in this text.

Complete Transactions and Completeness Theorems

The purpose of this section is to derive formally the The K-Completeness Theorem. For a transaction to be K-Complete it must be logically possible and moral for all agents in the Kantian sense: *all* of the maxims relevant to the transactions must be universalizable via the CI procedure for *all* of the agents participating in the transaction. To keep the exposition clear for this short paper, the transactions considered will be for two agents only.

Suppose two agents wish to engage in a joint venture in which the ends of both agents are inter-dependant. An example of such a transaction is a personal loan. The borrowing agent=s ends are to obtain the money and to repay the principle and interest of the loan according to the schedule agreed with lender. The lender=s ends are to furnish the money and have both the principal and the interest returned by the borrower according to the schedule. Furthermore, each agent must agree to the same schedule to make the loan possible. Note that each agent cannot satisfy his ends without the appropriate action by the other. For the purposes of this analysis, such a venture will be called a *transaction*.

Definition-Transaction

> A *transaction* is a mutually conceived venture between two agents, A_1 and A_2, (A_i will be used to refer to either agent) such that the ends of the agent=s maxims of action, M_1 and M_2, (M_i will be used to refer to either maxim) are dependent upon one another. That is, actuation of M_1 is not possible in the absence of M_2 and the actuation of M_2 is not possible in the absence of M_1. A_i implements M_i through a set of means. A subset of these means,$\{m_i\}$, are subject to the counterparty's control.

Definition-Complete Transaction

A transaction, T will be termed *Complete* if M_1 and M_2 are determined to be compossible and moral by A_1 *and* A_2 (*i.e.* each agent accepts moral responsibility for both maxims). A transaction will be *K-Complete* if M_1 and M_2 are held to be compossible and determined to be moral in the Kantian sense by A_1 *and* A_2, i.e. *both* maxims satisfy the CI procedure for A_1 *and* A_2, and $\{m_1\}$ and $\{m_2\}$are deemed moral by A_1 *and* A_2.

Remark

More intuitively stated, a complete transaction is a coherent transaction for which all maxims of action are considered moral by all parties to a transaction, T. A K-Complete transaction defines the procedure for determining morality and demands that all means resulting from the maxims in T are considered moral by all parties that have control of the means.

The counter-parties maxims of action, M_1 and $M_{2,}$ may not be compossible. M_1 may be dependent upon M_2 for its actuation but the two maxims may not be logically coherent. In the loan example, if the borrowing agent made a lying promise to repay, his maxim would have been enabled, but the loaners maxim would not be possible.

Lemma

For a transaction, T, each agents transaction M_i necessarily generates an additional maxim, M_i'. The maxim M_1' for A_1 is: For T, I enable M_2 so that M_1 is possible. For A_2 the maxim M_2' is: For T, I enable M_1 so that M_2 is possible.

Proof

The lemma is a necessary condition of the transaction. Since A_1 and A_2 wish to implement T and the ends of M_1 and M_2 are mutually dependant, both agents must enable the maxim of their counter-party. Thus the additional maxims M_1' and M_2' are generated.

Remark

This lemma is intuitively reasonable. If an agent enters into a transaction with a counter-party their ends are mutually dependant. The agent should also realize that his counter-party=s ends may be different from his and that he must support these ends in order to achieve his own ends. In the loan example, the borrower should realize that profit is the end of the lender. In order to receive the money the borrower should understand that he must support this end. The lender must understand and support the borrower's ends: receiving, using and returning the money according to the agreement.

Completeness Theorem

A transaction, T, is Complete if M_i is moral for A_i (i =1,2) and both agents are rational for T.

Proof

A complete transaction is both compossible and moral.

1. Proof of compossibility

By the lemma A_1 cannot accept M_2 into T if it is not compossible with his own maxim. For the lemma requires A_1 to accept M_1' which would directly contradict his own maxim and the rationality assumption if M_1 were not compossible with M_2. The identical argument holds for A_2, *mutatis mutandis*. Hence M_1 and M_2 are held to be compossible by A_1 and A_2.

2. Proof of morality

By the lemma A_1 must accept M_1' to enable his maxim. But, in T, M_1' is a necessary consequence of M_1. M_1 could not be moral if its necessary consequences are not moral. Therefore, M_1' is moral for A_1 in T. But M_1' cannot be moral for A_1 unless M_2 is moral. For how can he rationally consider the enabling M_2 moral without M_2 itself being moral. Hence M_1 and M_2 are both moral for A_1 in T. A_1 must also accept moral obligation for both M_1 and M_2 in T since his action initiates M_1 and M_2. The same analysis applies to A_2, *mutatis mutandis*.

K-Completeness Theorem

A transaction T is K-Complete if M_i is moral for A_i (i =1,2) using the CI procedure.

Proof

The Completeness Theorem applies to any system of morality that has a procedure for designating maxims as moral. If we use the Kantian system to determine the morality of a maxim, CI, then the Theorem applies to a Kantian system. But for Kant, if an agent is moral then he is also rational. APure reason is practical of itself alone and gives (to the human being) a universal law, which we call the moral law.@ (5:31) Hence, the rationality hypothesis need not be explicitly stated. K-Completeness also requires that A_i deem $\{m_i\}$ moral for both herself and her counter- party. This obligation is a logical consequence of Kant=s ends/means principle: "who wills the end wills also (necessarily in conformity with reason) the sole means to it that are within his control" (4:418) A human cannot know the moral law unless she is endowed with the faculty of reason. Hence, A_i must deem $\{m_i\}$ moral for both herself and his counter-party. This proves the additional requirements of the K-Completeness Theorem.

Remark 1

This result can easily be generalized to multiple agents by replacing M_i and A_i by the Cartesian product of a set of twoples K ($K_i = (M_i, A_i)$) with itself with the twoples (K_i, K_i) excluded from the resulting set.

Remark 2

The K-Completeness Theorem, a logical consequence of Kant's moral system, can be stated in a more intuitively:

> *A transaction between two agents is K-Complete if each agent deems both her and her counter-party's maxims of action and means to implement the transaction moral according to the Kantian system.*

The K-Completeness Theorem is intuitive because common sense dictates that a rational, moral agent entering into a transaction with another should assume that the counter-party is trustworthy and will perform morally. Otherwise, a rational agent would not enter into such a transaction The agent should also assume that the counter-party will not act in a way that undermines his own interests and also will be true to his commitments.

The Completeness Theorem considerably increases the stakes of moral responsibility for each agent. Furthermore, this increased moral responsibility applies to a wide range of human circumstances. Examples are: loans, employer/employee relationships, philanthropic grants, a two party joint project with interdependence, teacher/student relationships, etc. In addition, Kantian morality requires that an agent be morally responsible for the means required by her maxim of action. The K-Completeness Theorem states that an additional consequence of this moral system is that each agent in a transaction is obligated to ensure thst the means of her counter-party are moral.

Kant=s Analysis of Transactions in FPMM

In the preface to FPMM Kant states:

> The present groundwork is, however nothing more than the search for and establishment of *the supreme principle of morality*, which constitutes by itself a business that in its purpose is complete and to be kept apart from every other moral investigation.(4:392)

Kant goes on to indicate that, in spite of disadvantages, he restricted FPMM to examination of the supreme principle and not its consequences. Thus, it is not surprising that the text, with the exception of the section on the kingdom of ends and some of the examples, is silent on the issues of morality resulting from interacting maxims of more than one agent. But the analysis of the morality of a joint action by more than one agent is clearly a consequence of Kant=s system of morality. Moreover, despite Kant=s declaration of scope, several examples in FPMM concern the morality of a joint action. Since Kant introduced these examples, it is reasonable to expect that he should pursue these examples to their conclusion and not omit analysis of the morality of the joint actions inherent in the examples. On the other hand, as will be shown in the next section of this paper, Kant recognizes several of the issues of morality of joint actions in both FPMM and CPR.

An example of Kant's failure to consider adequately joint transactions is his analysis of the loan. The protagonist reflects on whether to borrow money that he knows he cannot repay while Astoutly@ promising to repay. (The reader is left to wonder why the protagonist would even consider such an obviously immoral act.) This action is rejected by Kant because it cannot be universalized without contradiction: if all agents promised falsely on loans the practice of loaning would be impossible.

But Kant=s rational for rejection does not include the role of the lender in this transaction. Kant leaves it for the reader to assume that the lender is behaving morally. But suppose the lender is a Fagin who lends money usuriously to desperate people and uses coercion and force to achieve repayment of his loans. Making a false promise to such a lender would still be an immoral act, but the motivation of the borrower in considering such an act would be more understandable. But making a true promise to such a lender would be an immoral act because it would abet his evil practices. On the other hand suppose the lender behaves morally, but the borrower wishes to use the money for an immoral purpose.

These speculations on the example illustrate that the morality of a loan transaction is dependent on the maxims of action of *both* the borrower and the lender. Further, by the K-Completeness Theorem, the borrower and lender have the additional responsibility of assuring that the actions of their counter-party will be moral. Kant does not consider any of these complexities.

The second set of examples concern beneficence towards others. These examples appear in both the first and second sections of FPMM. In the first section the examples concern actions of agents with three different attitudes towards beneficence: enjoyment, insensibility and indifference. Kant argues that only the beneficent actions of the agents with the latter two attitudes have moral worth because these actions will be performed from duty and not inclination. The action of the agent, who enjoys beneficence, while admirable, has no moral worth unless there is a sufficient motive of duty.

In the three examples there is no mention of the duties of the recipients of the beneficence to behave morally or the duty of the philanthropist to ensure that his gifts are employed in a moral fashion. For example, it would be immoral for an agent to give money to an indigent person if that person used the money to implement an immoral action. Furthermore, there are many situations which require the participation of the beneficent person. For example, an employer might hire an initially unqualified person to help the person become self sufficient and learn the required skills on the job.

The example of beneficence in the second section of FPMM involves a prosperous protagonist who is contemplating whether or not to use his prosperity to help others. He concludes that he must help others because he cannot will a universe in which all men deny help to others. In such a universe the Alove and sympathy of others@ would be denied to him in all circumstances. Almost certainly there would be occasions in his life in which he would require such sentiments. The example considers beneficence to be solely the action of the philanthropist and not a transaction between two agents. For Kant, the only rationale for the morality of this duty is the threat of withholding beneficence when the protagonist is in the role of the recipient. As in the examples from the first section, there is no mention of the responsibility of the philanthropist to ensure that his beneficence is employed morally.

Kant=s Recognition of the Additional Problems in the Morality of Transactions

As argued in the previous section, in FPMM and CPR, Kant never comprehensively analyzes the additional moral issues raised by transactions. However, throughout these works Kant recognizes some of the salient issues separately in different but related contexts even if he does not explicitly acknowledge that they are a logical consequence of his system as demonstrated by the K-Completeness Theorem.

Compossibility of Maxims

One of the requirements of a K-Complete transaction is the compossibility of the maxims of agents in a transaction. In CPR Kant provides a dramatic example of the moral dilemma resulting from a transaction having maxims that are not compossible. A subject is threatened by his sovereign with death unless he makes a false deposition against an honorable person whom the sovereign wishes destroyed. The maxim of the subject is to make no lying depositions while the maxim of the sovereign is to have others make lying depositions to advance his purposes. The maxims obviously directly contradict each other so the transaction cannot proceed without one of the agents altering his maxim. The dramatic threat of death creates a moral dilemma for the subject. The reader is left to wonder if there is a moral problem for the sovereign.

Extended Responsibility

The K-Completeness Theorem extends the moral responsibility of the agent to the maxim of his counter-party. In CPR Kant provides an example that illustrates this extended responsibility: the immoral steward.

The reader is asked to imagine that a steward is recommended to manage his business affairs with full discretion. This steward is extremely competent, has social graces and has the reputation of honesty and morality. However, the man will behave illegally and immorally in his management of the reader's affairs if he can be assured that this behavior will not be discovered. Furthermore, the behavior results in advantages for the reader. Kant states that anyone presented with such a recommendation would react with disgust and disbelief. Here Kant clearly demonstrates the extended responsibility of the prospective employer for the maxims and actions of the steward.

Adoption of the Counter-Party=s Ends and Means

The obligation to treat a man as an end in itself requires that an agent adopt the ends of his counter-party. Kant states this requirement explicitly in his analysis of the example on meritorious duties to others:

> For the ends of any subject which is an end in himself ought as far as possible to be *my* ends also, if that conception is to have its *full* effect on me. (4:430)

This requirement is closely related to the lemma that is required to derive the K-Completeness Theorem: in a transaction each agent must actuate the maxim of his counter-party. Since, by definition a maxim of action specifies an end; the agent must enable the counter-party=s end. Moreover, the ends/means principle also requires that the each agent in a transaction enable and support the others means. Kant also recognizes the extension of moral responsibility in the steward example in CPR. Here the reader is meant to be morally repelled by *both* the ends and means of the proposed steward.

Interdependence of Agents

The K-Completeness theorem states that a necessary condition for the morality of a transaction is that each agent deems the other agent=s maxim of action moral. This requirement is recognized by Kant in his conception of the kingdom of ends. Each rational being in Kant's kingdom of ends as a member (or a sovereign) and each must give and be subject to universal laws. Each member is subject to laws that are both his own and legislated by others in the kingdom. The necessity of acting on these laws applies to every member of the kingdom the same degree. I agent's are to be subject to each other's laws in the same degree the agent's actions must be inter-dependent.

In a sense, a K-Complete transaction is a minimal realization of a Kant=s kingdom of ends. Each agent is the author of a maxim and means that his counter-party is obligated to accept.

Extended Responsibility and the Need for an Ethical Community

Although Kant apparently does not recognize that his system *logically* demands that moral agents accept extended obligation, he does acknowledge that extended obligation exists. Kant deals with this aspect of morality much more directly in RBMR, which along with *Anthropology from a Practical Point of View* (APPV) is Kant's last word on morality. In RBMR Kant attempts to deal with the reality of evil in humans. He argues in a Rouseauian way that evil is a product of human reason that emerges when humans are in a social setting. The kinds of behaviors that emerge in society are "envy, addiction to power, avarice…" (6:94): Since social problems require social solutions the struggle against evil must also be amongst agents. Isolated individuals attempting to behave morally in a society in which others exhibit these evil behaviors are destined to fail. Kant's anti-individualistic approach to morality is summarized in the following:

> The highest good cannot be achieved merely by the exertion of the single individual toward his own moral perfection, but instead requires a union of such individuals into a whole working toward the same end-a system of well-disposed human beings, in which and through whose unity alone the highest moral good can come to pass" (6:97-98)

To state this in terms of Kant's moral system individuals cannot behave morally in society that is not comprised of moral agents. In such a society agents will interact with each other in a moral fashion. The criterion that determines whether such interaction is moral is K-Completeness, a logical consequence of Kant's original system. It is a measure of Kant's genius that his initial moral theory, which he formulated for individual agents, is robust enough to apply "toward the [entire human] species as a system that is cosmopolitically combined" (7:333) addressed at the close of his career.

As mentioned previously, the K-Completeness Theorem can be generalized to interactions amongst many individuals. This generalization can be intuitively modeled using mathematical graph theory. Interestingly, this visual model suggests Kant's "system of well-disposed human beings." However, this analysis must be postponed for a longer paper.

Kant clearly understood that moral behavior for an individual agent can be difficult. The K-Completeness Theorem shows that this difficulty increases in transactions that occur between agents which comprise the majority of our moral decisions. But this pessimism is best dispelled by Kant himself:

> Without being an enemy of virtue, a cool observer, one that does not mistake the wish for good, however lively, for its reality, may sometimes doubt whether true virtue is actually found anywhere in the world, and this especially as years increase and the judgment is partly made wiser by experience , and partly also more acute in observation. This being so, nothing can secure us from falling away altogether from our ideas of duty...instead reason by itself, independently of all appearances commands what ought to happen (4:408)

This is a nice note on which to end this paper. All the complexities of the Kantian moral system including the additional complications introduced by transactions can make it very difficult to behave morally. However, we all have a powerful resource which is given to us *a priori*: reason. If we employ reason in our moral decisions not only will we approach the ideal of morality, but we can honestly feel that we have behaved in a morally responsible fashion regardless of the outcome. I believe that such behaviors would satisfy Kant=s conception of acting from duty and that we would be proud of ourselves and wish to pass these behaviors along to our children.