The Importance of Moral Behavior in Context

At first thought, it is very reasonable to think that moral behavior for an individual should reflect how they think a whole society should act. After further consideration, however, one might be able to think of cases where one might have to act immorally for a greater good. In this essay, I will challenge Immanuel Kant’s idea that an action is immoral in all contexts if it is immoral in most.

Immanuel Kant’s philosophy states that all humans act on maxims, which are principles that guide our behavior. A maxim that any rational person would agree to is called a categorical imperative. Kant claims that moral behavior can only occur if it is congruent with a categorical imperative. While this is true in most cases, its important to consider specific details that might contribute to a person’s decision making.

“Don’t steal” is a common categorical imperative. This imperative is often challenged by the following moral dilemma: A man steals bread from another family, who I will refer to as family 1, to feed his starving family (family 2). Kantian ethicists would classify this as immoral behavior because it goes against the categorical imperative. I argue that this behavior can still be ethical because it promotes another categorical imperative, which is to prevent starvation. It can be inferred that if the family that got robbed had bread in the first place, they are better off in daily life than the family that robbed them. Therefore, family 1 loses less than family 2 gains, which puts the whole situation in a morally correct light. It shows how the imperative to prevent starving more important than that to not steal is more important in the man’s decision to steal. However, this would not be enough to convince a Kantian.
A Kantian ethicist would still consider this immoral despite an objectively less important imperative being broken. They consider all categorical imperatives equally important as they guide all behavior. Furthermore, one might argue that no categorical imperatives have to be broken in this situation. This is true for many cases like this. For example, the man could have worked to earn the bread. This not only prevents the no stealing imperative from being broken, it promotes the categorical imperative that one should work hard to support their family. Clearly it is immoral to steal the bread if this was an option. However, there is also the case in which the man had been trying to find work for some time and only stole the bread as a last resort. The context in which a categorical imperative is broken is an important factor when considering moral correctness. Even in this case however, there are ways in which no imperative needed to be broken.

Before resorting to stealing, family 2 could have asked family 1 for help in this situation, therefore not breaking the categorical imperative. This case is more challenging because family 1 now faces the categorical imperative that says they should help the less fortunate. It would be morally correct for them to give family 2 the bread. However, there will still be cases in which family 2 is turned away despite their best efforts, meaning family 1 has acted immorally and family 2 is back in a case where they are left without a choice, and they steal the bread. Family 1 made their best efforts to work within the categorical imperative, but couldn’t because family 2 was operating outside of one. Going back to the notion that family 1 loses less than family 2 gains, it can be said that family 1 is more immoral for denying family 2 than family 2 is for stealing.
This still might not be enough for a Kantian ethicist because of the belief all categorical imperatives are equally important, meaning both families are equally immoral. I reject this idea, because, in the process of breaking one imperative, family 2 promotes another, which is prevention of hunger. Surely if one action results in one negative and one positive, it is more morally correct than one that only results in a negative.

A Kantian would respond to this by pointing out that family 2 didn’t have to act immorally until they were acted upon immorally. They would say that the first immoral action was unnecessary, and if everyone acted in accordance to both imperatives there would have been no problem. However, family 1 might not have realized their behavior is immoral. Remember, a key aspect of Kant’s definition of the categorical imperative is that any rational person would agree with it. While, on paper, helping the poor is an obvious categorical imperative, family 1 could have seen family 2 not as a poor people in need of help, but as a group of freeloaders trying to get something they haven’t earned. This is not an unreasonable assumption in some contexts. Family one’s misfortune could have been recent and sudden as a result of a parent losing a job. They may still have nice and clean clothes from before, which could rationalize family 1’s thinking. In this case, family 2 steals not as a result of immoral action but because of a misunderstanding.

This may not be a sufficient rebuttal to some, as Kant’s ideas suggest that the categorical imperatives reflect the way one thinks everyone should act. Therefore, one rule being broken would not require a different rule to be. This suggests that family 1’s ignorance of the imperative of helping the poor would not result in theft, instead resulting in more mistreatment of the poor.
While I feel I’ve provided a sufficient example of a time where this wouldn’t be the case, I’ll look at a case that adheres to this idea and explain why it relates.

Suppose family 1 was not as well off as they seem, and this loaf of bread would be equally coveted by both families. If family 2 were steal it from them, family 1 would be much more likely steal now than before. This is a much less morally justifiable case. This emphasizes the importance of knowledge and awareness. If somebody think they may be right to act out of accordance with a categorical imperative, they have the responsibility to be aware of negatives that come with it. A man stealing from an equally resourced family could never be morally correct because the bread benefits them equally. The thief would have to make sure that he was not negatively affecting anyone in a significant way in order for there to be any consideration of morality.

This relates to the idea that intention is an important factor when considering morality. Kant’s theories suggest that intention is negligible, as his view of immorality considers action as most important factor. To me, there is a considerable difference between morality in the case I’ve been presenting versus, for example, an armed robber that breaks into a house and steals a TV for a quick check. Their intentions are obviously different, and therefore can’t be judged as morally equal.

You could still argue that actions separate them as opposed to intention, so I’ll look at a case with the same action. Suppose two tv’s are stolen from people in the same neighborhood. One robber steals because it’s an easier than working. The other needs to sell this tv to get money to support his young daughter, and is upset that he has resorted to this. There is a clear
moral difference between the two despite ending with the same result. This proves that intention is important to morality.

This is not to say that action is not important either. All factors must be considered in relation to the event as a whole. While the second robber mentioned above has the same intentions as the father of family 2, father 2’s actions were more moral because they have less negative outside effects.

All this contributes to the importance of context. Actions, intentions, awareness, and reasoning are all worth considering as opposed to just action. When considering all these, I believe you can find yourself with morally correct actions outside that conflict with the categorical imperative. Applying these to the situation with families 1 and 2, as my arguments and counterarguments have suggested, you can have a morally correct situation as follows: A man has exercised all other options, and has decided that the only way to support his family is to steal. He decides to target the wealthiest family in town, as they would have the easiest recovery from such theft. Once inside, he sees that the pantry is stocked full of food. He takes only what he needs to support his family til he can get back on his feet. To me, this is a morally correct situation. He knows he’s not hurting anyone in a substantial way and he didn’t take anything beyond what was necessary. He considered all his options, first by making sure theft is the only option, second by making sure his target wouldn’t be too affected. Most importantly, he didn’t do anything that promotes further theft. There would be no reason for a wealthy family to go steal because somebody stole 30 percent of their food. While rare, this could easily be a situation many people have been in.
In this essay, I’ve argued that moral behavior is defined by more than just the categorical imperative. Most behavior is defined this way; their wouldn’t be an argument if it wasn’t. However, there will always be that one exception, that one person who’s been left with no other option, is doing everything to negate negative outcomes, and doesn’t want to do any harm. The importance of context in moral behavior can be best summed up by the old saying, “don’t judge somebody’s actions until you’ve walked a mile in their shoes”.
Works Cited