

Abby Dye

Dr. Krone

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Formalism as an Ethical Theory

“Half of the results of a good intention are evil; half the results of an evil intention are good.” As American author Mark Twain notes, good intentions do not always translate into good consequences and bad intentions do not always translate into bad consequences. While Twain certainly does not present a new ethical theory, he provides a relevant foray into the world of formalism. As an ethical theory, formalism presents an interesting deontological perspective that focuses on the will of an action and does not depend on consequences. As a deontological theory, formalism, in the similar vein of a mixed system or deed theories, concentrates on ethical decisions that do not rely upon effects. Perhaps the most famous formalist, 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant introduced formalism as an ethical theory. As a unique breed of moral law, formalism emphasizes duty and reason in decision making, regards intention over consequence, and stresses the need for universality in moral actions.

For an ethical belief to be considered of the formalist perspective, it must not take consequences of the action into consideration, but rather it must focus on the act and the motive behind that action. The actual act qualifies as neither moral nor immoral, but rather the motives behind the action determine its ethical status. Moral judgments can only be determined by taking into account the intentions behind a decision or action and ignoring any possible repercussions. Although countless actions produce desirable consequences, those desirable actions should never be the reason to act in such a manner. A person can perform one action, no matter how

praiseworthy or blameworthy, with a multitude of different possible intentions behind it. For example, a man buys his wife a beautiful bouquet of flowers on his way home from work and she beams with happiness when he hands them to her. Even though this action brought about a satisfactory consequence, the wife's happiness, it could have stemmed from the fact that the man thought the woman at the flower shop was pretty so he bought flowers from her, that he was trying to hide his misdeeds with a gift of flowers, or that he simply wanted her to stop nagging him. In this case the good aftereffect was founded on appearances and the possible motives behind it have selfish undertones and do not put the wife's happiness as the number one outcome. Therefore, the formalist perspective uses ideas such as this one to emphasize the importance of motive and stress the fact that a worthy consequence does not authorize an action as a moral one. Philosophy scholar O.C. Jensen describes this importance of motive over outcome when he notes, "For my act to be morally good, I must do what is right from a specifically moral motive. This motive, in the ethical sense, is not some good behind the act, such as the happiness of others; nor is it, in the psychological sense, the benevolent impulse which is the spring of altruistic conduct" (Jensen 466). Accordingly, formalism states that a moral act depends upon the good will that drives it and nothing else.

Kant proposed that a moral perspective should concentrate on what should happen rather than what already is, or as Harold Titus interprets Kant, "the moral law results from the will governed by reason" (Titus 364). Rather than letting one's preferences, beliefs, or feelings influence a decision, the formalist perspective proposes that one make a decision on the basis of what needs to be done. Hence, one should put his or her own likes or dislikes aside and stick to what ought to be done. In this manner, the decision will stem not only from duty, but also, and more importantly, the reason and logic that drive that duty. Because reason and logic direct the

motive instead of one's inclinations, the moral law becomes what Kant calls, "the categorical imperative" (Kant 79).

In order for a moral law to be considered a "categorical imperative" by Kant's formalist standard, it must have the ability to universalize. Kant expresses this principle of universality by stating, "act in conformity with that maxim and that maxim only, which you can at the same time will to be a universal law" (364). A universal law constitutes any principle or action that can justifiably apply to every person in a wider, more global sense. This principle of universality maintains that formalism does not apply to one specific action at a certain time, but indicates that all actions of that nature must have the ability to be universalized. Actions or principles that cannot be universalized are not considered moral. In his work *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant further explicates the idea of universality of moral laws through his example of a man contemplating suicide. Although the man wants to end his own suffering, he realizes that suicide would contradict his duty to his own life and acknowledges that his behavior fails to universalize to the larger population; if his suicidal action did universalize, the population would diminish quickly. If one is to follow the formalist ethical theory as a way of life, then he or she must be prepared to attempt to universalize his or her behaviors before acting, and thus decide whether or not they are moral actions or decisions.

In stark contrast to teleological ethical theories, formalism presents an argument for valuing motives as a basis for moral judgment, using reason to follow one's duty, and universalizing behaviors and actions. Philosopher Immanuel Kant accentuates the significance of using reason to act according to one's duty rather than one's whims and expresses this issue through the principle of universality. As scholar O.C. Jensen notes, "Duty must therefore be a law which is known by all" (195). For an action to be morally justified, it must be able to be

universalized across the population of man. In acting according to duty and universality, one must ignore the possible consequences and judge the action's moral worth based on its motives. While an action may result in favorable outcomes, the formalist perspective points out the inconsistencies between intentions and consequences; therefore stating that a moral action must be judged on its intentions and motives instead of results.

Works Consulted

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