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### God and Kant's Suicide Maxim

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## God and Kant's Suicide Maxim

### Abstract

Kant's argument against suicide is widely dismissed by scholars and often avoided by teachers because it is deemed inconsistent with Kant's moral philosophy. This paper attempts to show a way to make sense of Kant's injunction against suicide that is consistent with his moral system. One of the strategies adopted in order to accomplish my goal is a de-secularization of Kant's ethics. I argue that all actions of self-killing (or suicide) are morally impermissible because they are inconsistent with God's established nature and order. It is argued that *the existence* of God as the locus of moral value and duty in Kant's moral system, and not *belief* in God, can explain the consistency of Kant's injunction against suicide. A synergistic view is offered, which rests on three arguments: First, suicide goes against God's authority. Second, suicide is inconsistent with our self-perpetuating nature. Third, suicide goes against the rational will.

Keywords: Kant; Suicide Maxim; Lying Promise; God's Existence

## God and Kant's Suicide Maxim

### Introduction

Kant gives four examples that illustrate how to determine our perfect and imperfect duty via the universalizability test. From introductory textbooks to scholarly literature, one of the four examples, his condemnation of suicide, is regarded as a failure. Teachers and scholars find that, according with Kant's own normative system, suicide is morally permissible. Such a criticism, in my view, is due to an erroneous interpretation of the way in which the universalizability test shows the source of perfect duty. Kant's formula of universal law of nature tells us what we ought not to do (do not act on non-universalizable maxims). It does not tell us what we ought to do. And it certainly does not tell us why we ought not to perform certain acts. For example, concerning the lying promise, it is typically argued that our perfect duty not to make lying promises follows from the unobtainability of a loan according to the following (roughly explained) thought experiment: Suppose that, finding herself in financial distress, Maria asks Robert to loan her some money promising to pay him back, but not actually intending to pay him back. It is then argued as follows: Kant told us that in order to determine whether it would ever be permissible for Maria to make a lying promise in order to obtain the loan, she must ask herself whether the moral maxim on which she intends to act could become a universal law of nature. The maxim in question commands that everyone in the same situation make a lying promise. Maria's maxim is something like this: 'Whenever I find myself in financial distress, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back even though I don't intend to pay it back.' The question is whether such a maxim can become a universal law of nature without generating either a contradiction in conception or a contradiction in will.

According to Kant, it is evident that Maria's maxim is a contradiction in conception. The reason, Kant explains, is that the universality of such a law 'would make promising itself and the end to be attained thereby quite impossible, inasmuch as no one would believe what was promised him...' (G. 422) The orthodox interpretation suggests that if everyone in financial distress requiring a loan acted on Maria's maxim, no one, including Maria, would obtain a

loan—moreover, if everyone acted on Maria’s maxim, promising itself would be impossible.<sup>1</sup> Thus, making a lying promise is (always) morally impermissible because its maxim is a contradiction in conception. Consequently, making lying promises is categorically impermissible. According to most critics, the problem with the suicide maxim is that a universal suicide law would *not* make suicide itself and one’s suicide thereby impossible. Quite the opposite, a universal suicide maxim would not prevent people who intended to commit suicide from committing suicide.

Kant offers arguments against suicide both in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (at G, 4: 421–2 and KpV, 5: 44). Note that his disapproval of suicide is supported by robust argumentation, unlike his rejection of the lying promise. He states that suicide is debasing (MS, 6: 423), a depraved act (ApH, 7: 259), even abominable (VE, 27: 343), and thus ‘the most horrifying thing imaginable’ (VE, 27: 372). For Kant, suicide is ‘certainly the most dreadful thing that a man can do to himself’ (VE, 27: 391); and it ‘is the supreme violation of duties to oneself’ (VE, 27: 342). Moreover, ‘By committing it, the human being makes himself into a monster’ (ApH, 7: 259). Suicide would ‘root out the existence of morality itself from the world’ (MS, 6: 423).

Notwithstanding such argumentation, there are writers who argue that Kant didn’t realize that his own moral philosophy permits certain cases of suicide (see for example, Cholbi 2010; Guyer 2007: 118–19; Harter 2011; Velleman 2008; Wood 1999: 152–3). Some commentators even suggest that Kant himself occasionally permits suicide (For example, Unna 2003; Latham 2007; Cholbi 2010). Commenting on Kant’s arguments against suicide, Paul Edwards asserts that, ‘Kant is surely wildly wrong here.’ (2007: 27) Iain Brassington argues that, in order to support suicide, ‘we do not even have to step outside of Kantianism. (2006: 574). Paul Guyer thinks that Kant’s argument against suicide is ‘peculiar and not very convincing’ (2007: 116). Christine Korsgaard denies that the suicide maxim rules out suicide (1996: 100). Allen Wood argues that it ‘does not commit you to the immorality of suicide’ (1999: 86). Henry Allison complains that Kant’s argument ‘is unsuccessful’ (2011: 184). Michael J. Cholbi remarks, ‘Regrettably, Kant’s characteristic rigor and systematicity are absent in his discussions of suicide. The arguments he musters for the duty against killing oneself are diverse, sporadic, and all too brief.’ (2000: 159) And the list of philosophers who think that Kant’s argument is unsuccessful goes on. I argue that Kant’s condemnation of suicide is categorical and in no case permissible.

According to Kant, moral impermissibility is determined based on the universalizability test. But the impermissibility does not follow from whether some ends are attainable or unattainable. Rather, it follows from a maxim’s being conceptually defective—that is, the maxim’s being self-contradictory. Granted, universalized, a suicide maxim would not prevent one from committing suicide. But that is not the point. Rather, the point is that suicide as an act runs conceptually counter to a system of nature whose natural disposition is to perpetuate its own existence. A suicide maxim would also destroy the rational will, which is the element that pronounces the moral law. Thus, suicide would destroy the very nature that sanctions the moral law—as I argue, a self-preserving nature that is created by God. Therefore, I would like to offer an understanding of Kant’s suicide example that is consistent with Kant’s own moral thought. I hope to show that, despite many attempts at secularizing it, Kant’s moral philosophy is more reliant on a spiritual and religious dimension than we normally are led to believe. Such a reading may explain why Kant’s argument against suicide succeeds. The reason is that suicide runs afoul to both rational commitment to the nature of free rational willing and to our nature as self-

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes it is put as follows: in a world where everyone acted on such a maxim...

preserving, rational beings—a nature created by God who is the paradigm of goodness and rationality. To support my thesis, I shall offer three arguments that work synergistically. First, suicide goes against God’s authority and order. Second, suicide is inconsistent with our self-perpetuating nature. Third, suicide goes against the rational will.

### Kant and Respect for Rational Persons

For Kant, a person is an entity of special importance to the universe—so much so that, according to Kant, the preservation of human life is ‘the first, though not the principal, duty of a human being to himself as an animal being.’ (MM 422-23) Hence, suicide is impermissible. Secularizers believe that Kant’s moral system is not based on—nor does it require—God’s existence. However, despite Kant’s concept of the autonomous will of the free moral agent, it is clear that Kant never argued that autonomy, rationality, and indeed the very possibility of morality, exist independently of God or just exist by pure accident. Quite to the contrary, Kant argues that morality in the sensible world is possible, and that objective morality must be grounded in an intrinsic good. He acknowledges that without an objective and human-independent source of good and perfection, morality would lack its universality and binding nature. It is true that for Kant the moral law exists within us, but why it exists within us is seldom acknowledged by secularizers. It is quite clear that morality implies the existence of God. Only on this assumption can Kant assert unambiguously and objectively that the human person is special (and therefore, suicide is immoral).

Thus, morality for Kant is possible because it is ultimately grounded in an objective locus, God. Kant places a special importance on the existence of God. As Stephen R. Palmquist notes, Kant argues that,

We believe in god [sic] as the being through whom all the diverse duties we give ourselves as individuals (duties that, in light of each person’s autonomy, seem bound to stand in conflict) can be united in a single, self-consistent tapestry, called the common (or ‘highest’) good. (Palmquist, 2009: 16)

Textual evidence for this interpretation can be found in the first *Critique*, where Kant observes that the highest good cannot be realized in the sensible world, but rather in a supersensible world, and guaranteed by God in the afterlife (A811/B839). Also, in the second *Critique*, Kant argues that two elements are necessary for the highest good, the first of which is virtue. However, virtue can be attained only through the immortality of the soul (KpV, 5: 122). The second element is happiness, which God can guarantee. Therefore, the harmony between virtue and happiness is attainable only in a moral world created and governed by God (KpV, 5: 128). After all, to assert that the human person is special independently of an absolute paradigm of perfection and goodness would be an arbitrary assertion that Kant certainly does not endorse. It is only because God created and bestowed upon the world a moral and rational order that Kant can declare that ‘...everything has either a *price* or a *dignity*. Whatever has a price can be replaced by something *else* as its *equivalent*; on the other hand, whatever is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a *dignity*.’ (G 434-435) On this view, therefore, human beings have an ‘intrinsic worth’ or ‘dignity’ that makes them valuable ‘above all price.’ These characteristics that humanity possessed are not, to use one of Bob Ross’s famous phrases, just ‘a happy accident.’

### The Universal Law of Nature Formula

Kant proposes a procedure to determine whether an action is a duty known as the universalizability principle: 'I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.' (G 402) This is referred to as the Formula of Universal Law of Nature, which tells us what not to do (do not act on non-universalizable maxims): 'Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law.' (G 421) Kant proposes the following procedure: Formulate your maxim clearly: State what you intend to do and why. Then ask whether you can either (1) conceive that your maxim becomes a universal law, or (2) whether you can will that it becomes a universal law. If your maxim fails either (1) or (2), then it is morally impermissible.

Regarding the first criterion, the conceivability of a certain maxim as a universal law of nature, I would like to suggest that Kant means that we determine the moral permissibility of an act by considering whether we can *logically* conceive that a maxim holds as a universal law of nature or a regularity of nature. To illustrate the idea, consider the following example. I can logically conceive of a unicorn; but I cannot logically conceive of a square circle or a triangle with fewer or more than three sides. In other words, acting on a maxim is morally impermissible if, when tested for universalizability, such a maxim is illogical like the concept of a square circle. Some may interpret the principle as asking what would happen in a world where such a maxim is a universal law. This is not quite accurate because if a maxim is a contradiction in conception, then that maxim cannot become a universal law in the first place. Thus, it would be incorrect to ask to imagine a world that contains such a natural law because that world could not exist.

The second criterion asks something different; it asks us to determine whether acting on a maxim is morally permissible by considering whether one can rationally will that it becomes a universal law or regularity of nature. Note that a maxim may pass the first requirement, but not the second or vice versa. For example, a universal law that commands that everyone litter is logically conceivable as a universal prescription. However, littering as a norm would not be the sort of act that a rational individual would be willing to accept.

Satisfying the criteria just mentioned leads to a distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. Kant typically used the term 'inclinations' to refer to our desires. Accordingly, perfect duties are duties that are always morally obligatory and admit no inclinations; but imperfect duties can yield to inclination. In *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), Kant explained that imperfect duties are 'duties of virtue.' They are duties one should respect, such as the happiness of others, and self-improvement (Kant 1991, 187-98/6:382-95). Actions that involve these examples are duties that admit of exceptions in terms of inclination because we are not always morally required to fulfil them. For example, regarding other people's happiness, morality does not require that we sacrifice our own happiness in order to promote the happiness of others. Therefore, our own happiness, which in this case is our inclination, restricts what we must do for others. In other words, we are morally obligated to act so as to benefit others, though we have greater leeway to choose how much and how often we ought to benefit others based on our inclination.

In order to illustrate the distinction between perfect and imperfect duty, Kant gives four examples, two of perfect duties to oneself and to others, and two of imperfect duties to oneself and to others: the lying promise, aiding others in need, developing one's natural talents, and the infamous injunction against suicide. I suggest that it is wrongly assumed that, according to Kant, duty follows from the universalizability test's showing a physical or practical impossibility to act on a certain maxim. Rather, duty follows from a logical analysis of a maxim. Consider the lying promise. According to Kant, the universalizability test is supposed to show that no exception is

permissible insofar as lying when in economic distress. If I wanted to lie in order to obtain a loan when in need, I would have to be willing to make it the case that everyone always lied in the same circumstances—but if this were the case, no one would ever believe me, and thus lying would not work, and neither I nor anyone else could obtain a loan. In other words, if I willed that a maxim of lying should become a universal law, then I would fail to accomplish my goal. Thus, lying is impermissible because, universalized, it would create a logical paradox. Another way that this is often presented is that, universalized, the universal law ‘Lie whenever you need to obtain a loan (something else you want)’ would undermine promise keeping altogether.

Usually, the lying promise example is taught as follows. Suppose you are in desperate need of money. No one will lend it to you. Joe is your last resort. You promise him that you will pay him back on Friday, though you do not actually intend to. The question: Are you justified in making a false promise? In order to determine whether you are permitted to make an exception, it is necessary to test the maxim on which you intend to act. The lying-promise maxim as Kant puts it is as follows: ‘When I believe myself to be in need of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, although I know that I can never do so.’ (G. 422) The universal law of this maxim is, ‘Everyone in need of money lies to lenders in order to get what they need.’

Based on Kant’s procedure, the question is whether you can conceive, or you can will that this maxim becomes a universal law. The lying promise maxim fails criterion (1), producing what Kant calls a contradiction in conception. There is something incoherent about this maxim. Universalized, there would be no moneylenders if no one ever intended to repay money lent to him or her. As a result, a borrower would desire a universal condition where there are no moneylenders left, which would make it impossible for the borrower to get the money he or she needs. As a rational being, thus, one cannot desire such a self-refuting condition. Kant does not argue that moneylenders or promising itself would disappear or anything of that nature. Rather, he simply argues that the lying promise principle cannot be conceived as a universal law and, therefore, we ought not to make lying promises (I will return to this point later).

Now let’s consider our duty to help others in need. In order to determine whether I have a perfect or imperfect duty to help others, I use the same procedure. My maxim: ‘what does it matter to me? Let everybody be as happy as Heaven wills or as he can make himself; I shall take nothing from him nor even envy him; but I have no desire to contribute anything to his well-being or to his assistance when in need.’ (G. 423) The question is whether I can conceive or will that this maxim becomes a universal law. Note that unlike the lying promise, refusing to help others in need to advance one’s own interest is conceivable. The maxim of ‘not helping others’ passes the conceivability requirement, which means that it is universalizable without generating any logical inconsistencies. It is logically *conceivable* that no one helps anyone in need in order to advance his or her own interest. Universalized, the moral law ‘I will not help others...’ would enable me to accomplish my goal of not helping others in need in order to advance my own interest—and it would also allow others to do the same. However, such a maxim fails to satisfy criterion (2). Why? Because, according to Kant, I cannot know that I may be the one in need. Thus, if I am willing to hold my maxim as a universal law of morality, and it occurs that it is I the one in need, then no one will help me. Therefore, as a rational individual, I do not desire a universal law that permits me and others to forego my obligation to contribute to other people’s wellbeing. This according to Kant’s procedure means that I have an *imperfect duty* to help others in need. It is an imperfect duty because I do not have a categorical obligation to help others. I can choose how often and how to help others in need. Failing to satisfy criterion (2) implies that my maxim is what Kant calls a *contradiction in will*.

Many teachers and ethics textbooks use the two examples just illustrated above to demonstrate Kant's examples of perfect and imperfect duty. Especially the lying promise example is widely regarded as the clearest, most uncontroversial example of Kant's universalizability procedure for determining the morality of an act.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the suicide example is widely regarded as inconsistent with Kant's moral system, and thus avoided. On closer inspection, however, the lying promise is the controversial example, while the suicide example is quite consistent with Kant's moral philosophy. To be sure, suicide is a complex issue. People commit suicide for a number of reasons. Here I consider those cases of suicide that Kant describes as being motivated by self-love. Kant presents the maxim of the person contemplating suicide as follows:

‘from self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life when its longer duration threatens more troubles than it promises agreeableness.’

The question is whether, as rational beings, we have any duty to ourselves to preserve our own lives and never commit suicide. Is it conceivable or desirable that the suicide maxim becomes a universal law?

According to Kant, such a maxim is logically inconceivable, i.e., it is a contradiction in conception to will one's own demise. There is something incoherent about willing one's death based on the same nature whose impetus is to preserve life. For Kant, the suicide maxim is a *contradiction in conception*, and so it follows that we have a perfect duty to preserve our own lives. Some commentators may argue that, at best, the suicide maxim may be undesirable, perhaps failing the second criterion. Note that the issue seems to stem from the notion that the contradiction in conception follows simply from the fact that, if a certain maxim were universalized, acting on that maxim would be logically inconceivable. Again, the example of the lying promise is supposed to show that a universal law of nature that permits people to make lying promises would prevent people from obtaining loans and ultimately to trust one another. However, critics point out, the suicide maxim does not make it impossible for people who intend to commit suicide from self-love to commit suicide. Whereas the lying promise maxim clearly shows the inconceivability of obtaining a loan, the suicide maxim, universalized, still makes it conceivable, and indeed possible, for an individual to commit suicide and for others to do the same.

But as already observed, whether an act is a contradiction in conception does not follow from the impossibility of physically/practically performing that act or the impossibility of accomplishing a certain goal. Also, while it might be physically possible to commit suicide despite a universal maxim in place, according to Kant's arguments, suicide is a contradiction in conception based on its being in violation of the very nature of the rational will (Such problems, I believe, stem from the secularization of Kant's ethics). To be clear, commentators have interpreted the issue of whether Kant's argument against suicide is valid on the following line of reasoning: If I willed a universal law to the effect that everyone in financial distress requiring a loan made the false promise to pay back the loan, no one would ever obtain a loan—in fact, moneylending would cease to exist. However, if I willed a universal law to the effect that from self-love all people who intend to commit suicide kill themselves, the universality of such a law of nature will in no way prevent people from killing themselves. Thus, the analysis just given

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, there is literature about exceptions of the lying promise, but for the purpose of this paper it suffices to say that the lying promise example is regarded as the clearest example of how the universalizability principle works.

appears to be correct on the ground that the lying promise clearly makes it impossible for the borrower liar to obtain a loan in the event that the lying-promise maxim becomes a universal law.

However, it is far from being obvious that if the lying promise maxim were to become a universal law it would be impossible for people to obtain a loan. This question hinges on the way we interpret the universalizability principle regarding the lying promise. Kant's universalizability test proposes that I contemplate whether my maxim could become a universal law of nature without generating a contradiction in conception or a contradiction in will. A law of nature is a way of describing a regularity that applies universally, such as gravity or inertia. Laws of nature, thus, describe causal forces or the behavior of physical objects. Since there is gravity, objects released in air are forced to fall downward (provided that nothing obstructs their trajectory). The point is that, if gravity is a universal and constant law according to which objects released in air must fall downward, there can be no exceptions for any objects not to fall downward when released in air. Now, what exactly does the universalizability test asks of us? When I test a maxim for universalizability, am I to consider the consequences of my maxim if it were to become a universal law that *obligates* or that *determines* or *causes* people to act in a certain way, as gravity or inertia does? Or am I to consider the consequences of a universal law of morality that gives people moral *permission* to act in certain ways? Specifically, regarding the lying-promise maxim, are we to imagine a regularity of nature that physically *forces* us to ask for a loan when in financial distress and to make a lying promise. Or are we supposed to imagine that such a law gives us moral *permission* to ask for a loan and to make a lying promise?

When we test the lying promise, we are supposed to imagine a hypothetical situation in which our maxim is a universal law of nature. But are we supposed to imagine a world in which everything is different or a world in which our maxim is a universal law, but everything else is the same? Are we to assume that in such a world everyone experiencing financial distress always makes a lying promise? Or is it conceivable that sometimes I ask for a loan and I do intend to pay it back? Is such a law supposed to apply universally in the sense that even those who ask for a loan and do intend to pay back the money will not be able to ask for a loan? Is the very notion of a loan something that would cease to exist under the lying-promise law? Are we supposed to imagine such a world in *media res* where people already have an understanding that making a false promise is already a universal law? Would it not be possible to know each other and ask for a loan and be believed? In what way, then, such a universal law of nature would exert its power upon human behavior?

The problem is that Kant's argument in the *Groundwork* at 422 is not exhaustive. He writes,

For the universality of a law which says that anyone believing himself to be in difficulty could promise whatever he pleases with the intention of not keeping it would make promising itself and the end to be attained thereby quite impossible, inasmuch as no one would believe what was promised him but would mealy laugh at all such utterances as being vain pretenses. (G. 422)

It appears that Kant wants us to think that we are to suppose that if the lying-promise maxim were a universal law of nature, I should expect that people would come to know this and expect that my supposed promise could not function as a promise—it could not get me the credit I am seeking, and they would laugh at my fraudulent request. Teachers often present the argument as saying that if this maxim were a universal law of nature, the practice of promise making would cease or something of that nature. I do not think that such a claim is part of Kant's argument. The

empirical conditions under which certain social practices can and cannot continue is a complex and contingent matter. As I understand him, Kant argues that if your false-promise maxim were used as an excuse or a justification for making a false promise in this case, then this very promise you intend to make would fail to function as a promise and could not get you the credit you are seeking. That's the whole point of it.

Regarding gravity as a law of nature, we must keep in mind that there is no question of whether an object released in air falls downward. Objects simply obey gravity. I cannot conceive that an object could make an exception and not fall downward when released in air. If gravity exists, objects will be affected accordingly. By analogy, it seems that when we try to understand Kant's universal law formula as it applies to the lying promise maxim, we have to suppose that the would-be borrower is causally determined or physically caused by the hypothetical lying-promise law's exerting its power upon humans. Such a power would cause a borrower to ask for a loan and the would-be lender knows that the borrower is going to make a false promise. But in the first place, in the case of people, we are dealing with free-willed rational beings, and not objects that can be influenced by natural laws. Second, are we to suppose that the lender's knowing about the borrower's intentions is, as it were, embedded in such a law? How is this possible?

For example, Pauline Kleingeld in the *Naturrecht Feyerabend* lectures, notes that Kant is explicit about the fact that we are supposed to imagine that both the fraudulent borrower and the would-be lender know quite well their intentions, i.e., that the borrower does not intend to keep his word, and the lender knows it (Kleingeld, 2017: 106). But how would the lender know that the borrower is in financial distress, and he intends to lie? The problem is that, as previously noted, a person asking for a loan would not even exist as a possibility in a world governed by a lying-promise law. Indeed, we said that such a world could not exist. It would be an impossible world just like a world where gravity exists and yet objects released in air don't fall downward or a world where some triangles have more or fewer than three sides! Thus, the fact that one's purpose is impossible in a world where the maxim is a universal law does not constitute the relevant contradiction. The point is that a universal lying-promise maxim cannot become a universal law of nature in the first place.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant states that we are to ask whether we could 'will [choose, without contradiction or conflicting volitions] to be a member of an order of things in which our maxim is a universal law of nature.' (KpV 5:67-71) I think that some people take this to put before us the thought that one of nature's laws will change, and we are to think out all the possibly 'unintended consequences' of that change, or the adjustments in people's behavior and expectations that it might initiate. This thought experiment would perhaps be quite mind-boggling. I do not think it is what Kant means. He is asking us to decide whether we can regard our maxim as compatible with quite local (not far-reaching but immediate and very intelligible) changes that could be anticipated if everyone in our situation were to behave as we are intending to do and to use our maxim as an excuse for it. It takes no science fiction imagination to think that if everyone who felt herself in financial distress were to borrow money on trust with no intention of repaying it, then word would get around that this is how people would behave when they are in financial distress and if in that case, I tried to get out of my distress by borrowing money on trust, nobody would lend it to me.

In the actual world, perhaps there would be another change in people's behavior—they would become better at hiding their financial distress and their intentions than they are now. Granted they might, we cannot know what unforeseeable consequences would accompany your

maxim's becoming a universal law. But to think in such terms may be a way of overthinking the matter. That is not a possibility that Kant is asking us to contemplate. What Kant is trying to get us to think is really very simple and obvious: if others behaved as you are intending to, but without any other changes in the world, then response on which you are relying, namely, a willingness to lend money on trust, would not be there for you because nobody in your situation could be trusted. If nobody in your situation could be trusted, it is reasonable to think nobody would trust you—hence the contradiction in conception.

I am sure swindlers could adjust to a world in which people became more suspicious of swindling, and still get away with their scams. But we are not imagining you to be able to anticipate these changes. We are supposing that you and your would-be creditor are used to honest dealing, and now because of your financial emergency, you are trying to exploit the assumptions of honesty to get money on trust without paying it back. Then Kant is asking you to imagine that in these situations (not others, created by large scale changes in people's behavior) all others in precisely your situation would try to exploit the situation just as you are. You can see that it would not work. You can challenge this argument only by adding gratuitous hypotheses about false promisors' becoming more successfully deceitful, or their victims more gullible. Kant's procedure is (according with KpV 5:67-71) that we are to ask whether we could 'will [choose, without contradiction or conflicting volitions] to be a member of an order of things in which our maxim is a universal law of nature.' In other words, the proper way to understand Kant's proposed test is to think in terms of whether a certain law of nature could exist in any possible world. For example, a triangle that has fewer or more than three sides is a contradiction in conception. It cannot be logically conceived in any possible world. By analogy, a law of nature that causes people in financial distress who do not intend to pay back money lent to them to ask for a loan, and still enables them to obtain a loan, is logically incoherent. For such a regularity of nature would seem to be self-defeating.

Note that no one (except for philosophers perhaps) asks whether there are or there could be triangles that have more or fewer than three sides. It is even impossible to visualize such a geometric figure in one's mind. Similarly, no possible world could contain a lying-promise law of nature. Therefore, the point is not whether I could, i.e., whether it would work for me, and I would obtain a loan in such a world—that's an irrelevant question. The point of the thought experiment is to show that rationality demands that in our financial dealings we never make lying promises. The universalizability test is not meant to show that in a world that contains the lying-promise law of nature a person in financial distress could not obtain a loan, because such a world cannot exist, and therefore such a situation would not ensue. The point of the thought experiment is to show that the lying promise maxim is logically inconsistent. This should be the point where we stop our thought experiment; and we should carry the experiment no further.

We have to interpret the lying promise maxim issue of inconceivability as follows. There exist laws of nature, such as gravity. Gravity is a constant law of nature according to which any object released in air will fall downward. Given the universal law of gravity, since objects must fall downward when released in air, and since I now release an object in air, it would be logically inconceivable that that object will not fall downward or will behave differently. We cannot even conceive a world that has a law that by definition causes all objects released in air to fall downward, but some objects released in air do not fall downward. Similarly, it is inconceivable that a world can exist in which one of its laws causes people in financial distress who do not intend to pay back the money to ask for loans. Put even simpler, imagine that people in financial distress are caused to ask for loans, though they do not intend to pay it back and money lenders

loan money only to those who pay back. Moreover, money lenders know who the people in financial distress who do not pay back are. Consequently, the following scenario would be impossible:

Person in financial distress: Lend me \$300.

Money lender: Only if you pay me back.

Person in financial distress: I will pay you back (with a sly wink, knowing that the promise is a lie).

Money lender: Okay, here's the money (knowing that the promise is a lie)!

Christine Korsgaard argues that there are three possible ways of interpreting the test, logical, teleological or practical. She points out that the issue cannot be decidable merely by an examination of Kant's wording. She writes, 'language supporting all [the three interpretations] can be found in Kant's texts, and it seems possible that he was not aware of the differences among them.' (Korsgaard, 1996: 80) Thus, she argues for a practical contradiction reading of the test. When we suppose whether our maxim can be a universal law of nature in deciding whether it provides us with an acceptable excuse for evading our duty, we are to imagine not a new nature in which this has become a universal law of nature and all the consequences that have played out; rather, we imagine our world with this one change and its immediate results—people know that those in financial distress cannot be trusted and then they act as they would act in our world if they knew that. We are not supposed to go farther.

But if this is the case, then it would seem that Kant's sophisticated ethical system boils down to this:

- If I know that you are deliberately lying to me, as a rational individual, I will not believe you.
- I know that you are deliberately lying to me now.
- Therefore, I will not believe you.

What I would like to stress is that the contradiction that we have to consider is a logical one and not a question of actual attainability. In other words, the question is not whether in a world in which this maxim is universal there could be no such practice as promising, or whether in such a world I would not be able to obtain a loan. Rather, the test shows that no possible world that contains such a maxim can exist. Thus, we do not have to try to imagine a world where a maxim is in place and then consider all the implications of that maxim, but we have to simply stop after we have realized that the maxim is self-contradictory. Since our maxim is self-contradictory, and therefore not a maxim that could exist as a universal law of nature in any possible world, the point is to show that our maxim is illogical. As a result, the immorality or impermissibility of acting from that maxim does not follow from the fact that, universalized, *my maxim would not enable me to obtain a loan*. That is because the lying promise maxim cannot be universalized. So, the impermissibility, the perfect duty that we have to never make lying promises, follows from a logical analysis rather than from the physical implications of acting from our maxim.

The difficulty, however, is to justify two issues. One, as Kant himself puts it, the categorical imperative could still be a 'chimerical idea without any truth' (GMS, AA 04: 445). It is still a matter of debate why the categorical imperative is objectively binding—especially on a secular account of morality because, on secular morality, no objective, ultimate paradigm of morality exist. It is not clear why we are necessarily bound to the moral law as an imperative as a result of a test showing whether or not a moral principle is universalizable unless such values and

duties are grounded in God's moral nature (Anscombe makes a similar observation in 'Modern Moral Philosophy' 1958: 6). The idea that an act is wrong because its maxim cannot be universalized does not seem to have any plausibility to it. Two, how does such a procedure reveal to me that I have a *perfect* duty rather than an *imperfect* duty to never make lying promises? The question is what connection there is between self-contradiction and perfect duty. If I make a false promise to you and you know that I am lying to you, and I know that you know that I am lying to you, you are not going to believe me—and if I am rational I would not even try because I know that you won't believe me. This is painfully obvious. Thus, the principle boils down to this: If a proposition is self-contradictory, it is morally impermissible; if it is morally impermissible it is self-contradictory. But this is a question-begging principle. What reasons do we have to assume that self-contradiction demand perfect duty? After all, it is possible to think of a number of examples where making a lying promise should be morally permitted or even required in order to fulfill some important duty.

Therefore, the impermissibility of acting from a maxim does not follow from the question of whether we can *attain* a certain outcome if our maxim were to become a universal law. This is because if the maxim is not universalizable, it means that the maxim is a contradiction in conception; as such, it is not a question of what we could or could not attain if the maxim were a universal law of nature. If the maxim is not universalizable, it means that such a maxim could never be a universal law of nature in any possible world in the first place. Consequently, what matters in determining the impermissibility of a lying promise is not the failure to *obtain* a loan in a world whose law of nature is 'when I believe myself to be in need of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, although I know that I can never do so.' This is because the maxim is logically inconceivable. As a result, the perfect duty follows from a logical analysis rather than the unattainability of a loan. By the same token, then, in determining the permissibility or impermissibility of suicide based on a universal suicide maxim, we have to apply the same principle. In other words, we must analyze the logic of the suicide maxim and not the physical or practical consequences of a suicide maxim. Moreover, we must assume that a paradigm of duty and moral value exists, and such a paradigm must be God. And when we do so, we realize the error of regarding the suicide maxim as a mistake on the ground that if such a maxim were universalized, suicide would still be possible to actualize. According to Kant, suicide is conceptually incoherent—regardless of whether it can be universally actualized.

### The Suicide Maxim

Kant offers three interconnected lines of argument against suicide. First, in willing my own demise, I act against God's authority to determine the duration of my existence. Second, suicide is incompatible with our nature—that is, it is in the nature of humans to thrive; so, a maxim that sanctions self-destruction cannot be coherently willed as a universal law of nature. Third, since suicide destroys the rational will, and since the rational will is the locus of moral worth, suicide goes against the very nature of the rational will, which is the element of humanity that imposes moral requirements upon us. As Kant notes, suicide is tantamount to '[withdrawing] from all obligation.' (MM 422-23) Suicide is inconceivable because it destroys the very rational will that authorizes and generates all moral obligation in the first place. For Kant, it is an irrelevant fact that a person can deny morality and kill herself. Of course, one can reason that way, but such a way of thinking would be irrational, but moreover it would go against the very purpose and nature of the world that God created and decided. The reason is that, whether we like it or not, we cannot opt out of morality. We are moral beings through and through and

cannot get out of moral obligation by simply discounting our obligations. People often do so, but when they do so they act irrationally.

Let's examine the first argument. Suicidal individuals, Kant claims, are 'rebel against God,' who will to end their lives and 'upset the wisdom' of God who created humans to be rational and to take care of their own bodies. God is 'our owner; we are His property.' To will to end one's own life, thus, is to play God (LE 154). Such a line of argument, as I previously mentioned, is not logically discrete, but rather complementary to the argument from nature and the argument from the inconceivability of destroying the rational will. Some philosophers regard the above-illustrated line of argument as inaccurate. For example, Michael J. Cholbi argues,

This first argument is regrettably imprecise, with Kant both suggesting that suicide is ungrateful, as we fail to acknowledge God's goodness in creating both us and the world, and covetous, since we treat ourselves as if we, and not God, enjoyed sole dominion over our lives. (2000: 161)

But the argument is not that suicide is ungrateful or covetous. Rather, since God created humans as creatures that perpetuate their existence, suicide goes against God's order. Note that this is not a naturalistic fallacy, as some may observe. The naturalistic fallacy is that if something is natural, by definition it must be good. For, it is not only that our nature is self-perpetuating, but what's important is that our nature was decided by the creator of the world—who is the source of morality and regards suicide as counter to his moral nature. Here we are not talking about, for example, a father who wishes a certain outcome for his child's life. Rather, we are talking about the creator of everything, God. He is the paradigm of goodness and reason. Rationality, it may be said, is the way God thinks. Since God created the universe and humans, and gave them the capacity to use logical reasoning, anything that runs counter to the laws of reasoning, which presumably consist in God's mind, will be logically defective. Moreover, there is nothing imprecise about the notion that God enjoys the sole dominion over our lives. If God exists, as the creator of the world He, in fact, has dominion over our lives.

Now, God created humans, among other things, to thrive. He did not create them as self-destructive beings. Everything about human beings is about taking up nourishment, growing, and reproducing. Everything about human nature is about perpetuating human existence. That's what God established when He created humans. Consequently, a creature endowed with the capacity to reason that wills its own destruction clearly acts irrationally—that's because contemplating one's own demise runs counter to God's order and the way God structured the universe. Obviously, it is physically possible for one of God's creatures to destroy itself as a universal prescription. But in so doing that creature would act irrationally on a maxim at odds with God's rational will and order. Therefore, perfect duty does not follow from the physical/practical impossibility to act from a maxim; rather, it follows from a logical analysis of the irrationality of suicide. Our perfect duty not to commit suicide, that is, follows from a logical analysis of the maxim to kill oneself. What makes such a maxim irrational is not so much about human beings' being ungrateful and covetous. Rather, suicide goes against the paradigm of reason, which is God, who designed humans to sustain their existence and desires that they continue their existence and not kill themselves.

Cholbi may not be satisfied with the above argument as he remarks, 'it contradicts numerous Kantian doctrines that he would later come to articulate in his critical philosophy.' (161) The reason, Cholbi worries, is that 'If our knowledge is confined strictly to empirical experience and its necessary conditions, then to attribute to God such properties as owning us or shaping the natural world in a beneficent way amounts to theoretical speculation.' (161) But

when Kant states that God owns us, he is not at all making an unwarranted metaphysical speculation. Since humans are rational beings and since the moral law lies within us, it is evident that for Kant this is not some sort of happy accident. It would be quite implausible that humans are free-willed, rational beings, and that morality were possible, just as a result of a pure cosmic accident. Kant clearly argues that such characteristics point to a higher order of rationality and morality rooted in an unchanging paradigm of rationality and morality—which must be God. Granted, our knowledge may be confined to empirical experience, but it doesn't follow that God's existence cannot be established on the basis of our empirical experience. Therefore, Kant's arguments for God's existence are not theoretical speculations. As Kant writes,

There are in the idea of reason obligations which are completely valid, but which in their application to ourselves would be lacking in all reality, unless we make the assumption that there exists a supreme being to give effect and confirmation to the practical laws (G. A 589/B 617).

Also, since the linchpin of Kant's moral thought is the autonomous and rational nature of humans, which makes humans creatures above all price, it would not be possible for humans to have the kind of value that Kant argues humans possess unless such a value is grounded in an objective moral paradigm and authority—God.

It is worth noting that in Kant's mature ethical thought, it seems that while God as an ideal and postulate of reason is very important to Kant's thought, God does not seem to be fundamental in Kant's moral system. As one example, Kant writes in the moral proof of the third Critique,

This proof, which one could easily adapt to the form of logical precision, is not meant to say that it is just as necessary to assume the existence of God as it is to acknowledge the validity of the moral law, hence that whoever cannot convince himself of the former can judge himself to be free from the obligations of the latter. No! All that would have to be surrendered in that case would be the aim of realizing the final end in the world [...] by conformity to the moral law. Every rational being would still have to recognize himself as forever strictly bound to the precept of morals (KU, 5:450-451).

It is precisely in the *Groundwork* where the only foundation of morality can be found as a universal and unconditioned system, namely, in nothing but the good will itself. And the Formula of Humanity should derive its authority from this unconditioned and formal foundation—for it asserts that each and every rational being cannot help but view itself as an end rather than a means. It is from this fact of experience and its connection to the basic principle of morality that dignity is granted. However, my argument is not that we required *belief* in God in order to ground these principles. It seems clear that Kant is trying to appeal to the nonreligious, as well. Therefore, he demonstrates that it is possible to determine our duties, what is morally permissible or impermissible, what is noble or what is not, independently of any religious doctrines or belief. But the ontological question is quite different from the epistemological question. Namely, while an individual is not required to be religious in order to determine his duties, the objectivity and universality of morality are possible because of rationality—both of which ultimately are grounded in God's nature. As Kant notes, 'We have been placed in this world for certain destinies and purposes; but a suicide flouts the intention of his creator' (27:375). Stephen Evans (2018) presents this idea as Kant's argument from human dignity as follows:

1. Human persons have a special kind of intrinsic value that we call dignity.

2. The only (or most plausible) explanation of the fact that humans possess dignity is that they are created by a supremely good God in God's own image.
3. There is a supremely good God. (Evans, 2018: §5, para. 4)

Furthermore, for Kant it is not an accident that humans have a moral and rational nature. There must be a source and creator of such a nature. Thus, I think that there is no question in Kant's mind that God exists—far from being theoretical speculation. It is true that Kant was critical of the ontological, the cosmological, and the teleological arguments. Nevertheless, Kant never denies God's existence. As Palmquist points out, 'Kant intended his criticism of the traditional theistic arguments not as an assault on the validity of theology or religion, but as a preparation for a more authentic way of rationally affirming God's existence (2009: 3). Alexandru Petrescu also notes that for Kant morality is possible *only* if God exists. And in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explained the existence of God as the Unconditioned, a paradigm of perfection necessary to anchor everything that is contingent (Petrescu, 2014: 199).

Thus, Kant's argument against suicide, which is based on the notion that suicide goes against God's will, is far from being, as Cholbi complains, 'bewildering.' Rather, it is a sound argument. Regarding the injunction of speculation, note that Kant is not speculating on questions that go beyond our ken, such as any attribute of God's. For example, Kant is not arguing whether or not there is a heaven or hell or whether God punishes all wrongdoers without the possibility of redemption or whether God has foreknowledge or middle knowledge or whether or not God requires evil in the world or any other difficult questions of that nature. Here Kant presents plausible reasons for the existence of God based on the objectivity of morality and the existence of a rational order. And since God is the creator of everything, it follows that God, in a certain sense, owns us. And if God did not exist, it would be a bizarre accident that we are free-willed, rational, and moral beings.

Furthermore, Cholbi notes,

By willing our own deaths, we oppose God's plan for us or exercise a power of choice that properly belongs to God. Yet Kant repeatedly states that moral obligation derives from the rational will of moral agents and not from some external moral authority capable of influencing our conduct.

First, such a remark misses an important distinction. It is true that Kant states that moral obligation derives from the rational will of moral agents. This is the epistemological question. Namely, according to Kant, we come to *know* our moral obligations through our rational will. But what is crucial here is the ontological question of the very existence of the rational will and the very possibility of morality. While Kant states that we can know our duties through our own rational will without relying on external authorities, Kant does not doubt that our rational and moral features are created and conferred upon us by God. In other words, I can know the moral law without my being a religious person, without believing that God exists. But I could not know the moral law without the possibility of knowing and the possibility of morality, which are grounded in God.

Second, Cholbi's observation is true insofar as it applies to the physical realm. It is clear that, according to Kant, it applies to finite things and not to God. For Kant, the moral law is within us. Rational human beings are self-legislating individuals. As such, no external entity possesses moral authority over the rational individual. But when Kant states that (as Cholbi puts it) "moral obligation derives from the rational will of moral agents and not from some external moral authority", Kant refers to external moral authorities like the church or the state or the family or other such external entities. But God is not like these entities. He is *the* moral authority

per antonomasia, the one by virtue of which the world exists in the first place and morality and rationality exist in the first place. Kant, therefore, presents a sound argument to the effect that the creator of existence and morality exists and made us, not as self-destructing creatures, but as rational creatures that ought to take care of themselves and one day may be in a spiritual position to exist in a harmonious state of happiness and virtue with their creator. Consequently, it follows from this that suicide is a contradiction in conception, and thus it is immoral.

Again, what renders suicide a contradiction in conception is the fact that God, who is our creator and the creator of the world, of rationality, and of morality, in creating the world and humans, He established that humans perpetuate their existence and develop their natural talents. As such, God is the owner of everything that exists. He did not create humans to be self-destructive creatures, but rather to be respectful of their rational nature and perpetuate their existence. A suicidal individual would be morally defective. Thus, this first argument is valid. Furthermore, the argument clarifies Kant's second interconnected argument that suicide is incompatible with our own nature. To state that humans are special independently of God would be a vacuous and an arbitrary assertion. Without God, no organism would be more special than any other. However, Kant does not make such an assertion. Thus, Kant means that, as we are special creatures of God, it is against our nature as perpetuating-life organisms endowed with rationality to commit suicide—a nature and order of things that the creator of the world decided and established.

We now turn to Kant's third argument, which shows that suicide is logically inconceivable because it annihilates the very element of human nature that makes morality possible for us, and that is the rational will:

To annihilate the subject of morality in one's person is to root out the existence of morality itself from the world as far as one can, even though morality is an end in itself. Consequently, disposing of oneself as a mere means to some discretionary end is debasing humanity in one's person. (MM 423)

Kant's third argument has two important aspects. The first is what is known as Kant's principle of humanity: 'Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end' (G. 429) According to the principle of humanity, rational individuals must be treated as ends in themselves and never as means to some end. Suicide from self-love, Kant notes, is deplorable because it amounts to a person's treating himself or herself as a mere means to an end. Thus, suicide violates the principle of humanity. The second aspect is that suicide destroys the rational will, which is the very source of our moral duty. It is contrary to reason to contemplate that reason sanction its annihilation.<sup>3</sup>

As I suggested, these three arguments work synergistically. The first is the most important because it shows that suicide is an act contrary to God's will. God created the world and conferred upon humans the capacity of rational thinking. Moreover, He created humans as self-preserving creatures and not to dispose of their lives as they see fit. God's existence, thus, makes it true that human persons are invaluable above all price. We possess a special value to the universe insofar as we are autonomous and rational moral beings. We determine our duties autonomously through our rational capacities without the reliance on external forces or authorities. But this doesn't mean that our capacities and moral duties can exist without God. Consequently, it is morally impermissible to commit suicide because suicide would be contrary

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<sup>3</sup> For an insightful discussion of this issue, see Jennifer Uleman (2016). No King and No Torture: Kant on Suicide and Law. *Kantian Review*, 21, pp 77-100 doi:10.1017/S136941541500031X.

to God's intended purpose of creation of the world and human creatures. Hence, when in the second argument Kant argues that suicide is at odds with our nature, and in the third argument he argues that suicide annihilates the rational will, such arguments are sound because they are supported by the existence of God, who created human nature and the rational will.

Therefore, seen under this light, it is the lying promise that appears to be, if not the more controversial example between the two, the example that suffers from poor argumentation. At any rate, making lying promises and committing suicide are impermissible based on some logical aspect of their maxims that violates rationality in some respect, and therefore leads to a contradiction in conception. Regarding the lying promise example, as we have seen, the moral impermissibility follows from the fact that, as a universal law of nature, the lying-promise maxim is logically inconceivable. Since it is inconceivable, the test stops there; and the questions of whether such a law of nature would enable me to make a lying promise to obtain a loan, or whether or not I would obtain a loan, are irrelevant. Making a lying promise from a universal law of nature is not an event that could exist. If the existence of a universal law of nature is impossible, like the existence of a square circle, or the possibility that objects do not fall upon release despite gravity, we do not test moral impermissibility by determining the practical or physical implications or outcomes of a universal law. Rather, we test its logical consistency.

However, the result of such a test as it applies to the lying-promise maxim, as we have seen, does not show in what sense I have a perfect duty to never make a lying promise. In other words, the point of the universalizability principle is to show whether an exception can ever be made. Imperfect duties allow exception, as in the case of helping others in need or developing one's natural talents. But if, for example, my making a lying promise will enable me to fulfill some important duty—for example, to avoid suicide—then it seems plausible to assume that I can make an exception. Furthermore, the problem with the lying promise maxim is that Kant does not offer any immediate supporting argumentation to show why the lying promise is categorically wrong. The fact that it is logically inconceivable does not show that it is immoral. And therefore, it is difficult for secularizers to explain on what ground it is wrong to act on a principle that cannot be universalized. In other words, why is it categorically immoral to make a lying promise? Because it cannot be universalized. But why are non-universalizable principles immoral? These are very difficult questions. The purpose of this paper is to show that Kant's injunction against suicide (as all other examples of duty) are consistent with his moral system if we dismiss a secular interpretation and adopt a religious one. Kant shows that suicide is always impermissible because it is against our self-preserving, rational nature, a nature created by God, who is the paradigm of reason and morality. Yes, it is possible for humans to commit suicide. It would be even possible in a world in which one of its laws of nature caused people to commit suicide or allowed people to commit suicide. Still, suicide would be conceptually incoherent for the reasons I have offered.

Arguments to the effect that Kant's argument against suicide is fallacious will likely continue to exist. My goal here has been to suggest a coherent way Kant's suicide example works. It works when we understand the proper function and target of the universalizability principle. And it ultimately owes its logical coherence to a theological aspect of Kant's moral philosophy that secularizers too often and too quickly try to discount.

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