Introductory ethics

Questions and Answers 17th April 2008 Q1. Explain Kant's Formula of the Universal Law. By appeal to examples, explain the difference between a " conceptual" contradiction (or a contradiction " in conception") and a " practical" contradiction (or a contradiction " in the will").

Kant states the formula of Universal law is achievable only when one acts in such a " maxim" that the action has the potential to become a universal law. Kant considers the example of committing suicide as a maxim. The contradiction in conception test is the third step to analyze whether an action is morally permissible or not. The maxim of committing suicide does not pass the stage of contradiction in conception hence it is not morally right to perform the action as it does not have the potential of becoming a universal law.

Kant cites another example of refusing to help others in pursuit of their projects. This maxim according to Kant easily passes the contradiction in conception test but fails to pass the final test of contradiction in will. According to this maxim it is our duty to help people sometimes but only to a certain extent, not in each and every given situation.

Kant further cites the example of a perfect duty in keeping the promises you have made to others but actually have little intention of actually keeping the promise. There is a self-contradiction maxim in this intention of making a promise to achieve some kind of desired purpose, but with no intention of keeping it. The contradiction is in the fact that this maxim cannot become a Universal law, because it would then imply that one has to lie every time, in order to achieve the desired result.

Thus Kant clearly elucidates that a Universal Law will have no contradiction either in conception or in will. It must be applicable rationally and only then

can it effectively become a Universal Law.

A. 2. In the " murderer at the door" maxim Kant imagines a number of coincidences that may occur when you reply honestly to the murderer's questions. He states that when the person at the door is answering the questions of the murderer, whether the victim is at home, it is likely that the victim may have secretly left the house and thus will not get in the way of the murderer and as a result the murder might not take place at all. He further states that lying to the murderer and telling him that the victim is not at home would instigate the murderer to look for him outside the house, and in case the victim is found the chance of the murder taking place are very high. An assumption Kant makes in his first proposition is that when the murderer looks for the victim at home, there is likelihood that the neighbors may have apprehended some thing when the murderer searches the house, and the murder could be averted.

Korsgaard's tries to find a solution to the Kantian ethics. She sates that abiding by an unwavering solidarity to Kant's ethics can invite serious trouble when dealing with evil or immoral people. She states that in the example of the 'murderer at the door,' if the murderer is lying then it is moral to lie to the murderer.

However, if Kant ethics are religiously followed, then this lying cannot be accepted. She states that in opposition to Kant's theory of acting only according to maxims which have the potential of becoming Universal laws, it would be acceptable to lie to the murderer. The solution that she offers to the problems is that a moral theory should on the one hand define the ideal of a moral world, and at the same time elucidate how one should deal with evil in this type of a world.

She proposes that Kant's 'Formula of Humanity' can be considered as the 'ideal component' while the 'formula of Universal Law' can be considered as the non-ideal component of the theory. In this way, she suggests, how Kant's moral theory will be able to effectively deal with the evil aspect of the world without having to lose its moral values.