The Categorical Imperative and Collegiate Society

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Abstract: This paper examines Greek Life and recreational drug use as two pillars of the collegiate society where college students are violating the 1st and 3rd formulations of Kant’s categorical imperative. This is done by the analysis of the motivations behind such actions as hazing and social interactions in fraternities and sororities, and also how the act of using drugs is using your body as a mere means to achieve pleasure. This paper offers a new perspective to the collegiate landscape and attempts to show how this can possibly be changed. This paper can possibly motivate a reformation of the two pillars and perhaps change the collegiate society for the better.
A deontological approach to morality consists of the examination of the motivations of actions. This approach is highlighted by Kant’s categorical imperative. His categorical imperative can be used as a way of examining the motivation for action. My paper will use the 1st and 3rd formulations of Kant’s categorical imperative as a way to define guidelines for motivated actions. The guidelines will then be applied to collegiate society today and it will be argued that many college students directly violate the guidelines for motivated actions set forth in the 1st and 3rd formulations of Kant’s categorical imperative.

*The First Formulation of the Categorical Imperative.*

The 1st formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative holds that people must “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction.” (Kant). A maxim is a general rule of conduct, and a universal law is a maxim that is applied to all of society where all must follow the rule of conduct outlined by the maxim. To explain this formulation Kant uses the act of lying. Kant says that it is wrong to lie because if the maxim that lying is morally permissible is universalized then that would create an undesirable state of society where all would lie and there would be no universal truth. Therefore it is wrong to lie because the universalization of the maxim of lying would not be desirable. According to this formulation an act is only right if the universalization of the maxim of the act would create a desirable state of society.

*The Third Formulation of the Categorical Imperative.*

The 3rd formulation of the categorical imperative holds that people should "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means." (Kant). Humanity can be defined as member
of your society as well as yourself. This includes yourself, your peers, family, and friends, people you’ve never met or never will meet. Basically, everyone you share this world with. The best way to explain this formulation is through example. Using someone as a means would be having someone pick weeds, water your plants, cut your grass, and perform any other gardening act with no intention of paying them for their work. This would be using someone as a mere means, with the mean being gardening. This would violate the 3rd formulation of the categorical imperative because you are using someone to achieve a goal, and that someone is not benefiting at all. Now it is morally permissible to treat someone as a means as long as you treat them as an end also. Take the gardener example, you are treating them as a mere means, but if you pay them for their work then they will be treated as a means as well as an end, with the end being the monetary payment for their labor. As long as you treat humanity as a means and an end and never as a mere means then your actions are considered morally permissible by the third formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative.

The 2 Pillars of Collegiate Society.

In this paper I am going to use 2 select pillars of collegiate society to exhibit my argument that many college students are violating the 1st and 3rd formulations of Kant’s categorical imperative when they are acting.

(1) Greek Life. The first pillar of collegiate society that must be defined is the lifestyle that comes with being a part of a fraternity or a sorority. Young men and women alike participate in the process of walking to and from houses, dressing up in proper attire, visiting social gatherings, talking to other young men and women, etc. This process is much better known as “Rush Week”. After Rush Week these young men and women
receive bids from prospective fraternities and sororities, and upon the accepting of the bid, they join or pledge their respective Greek organization. Living the “Greek Life” does have its merits; Greek organizations present students with many opportunities whether academic, philanthropic, or socially. This argument is not an attempt to redefine Greek Life; it is just an attempt to look at these organizations through a different lens or perspective; perhaps a more critical eye in terms of their members acting in violation of the 1st and 3rd formulations of the categorical imperative. This essay will focus on the social aspect of Greek Life. It will examine the actions that Greek organization members take “when representing their respective brotherhood/sisterhood” (Mohler-Kuo). Greek Life is largely based on social interactions or socials (as the organizations name them). This essay will try to expose some possible harsher realities of these organizations, in respect to the previously defined formulations.

(2) Recreational Drug Use. The second pillar that deserves to be discussed when examining collegiate life is the widespread use of drugs. First, the term drug must be defined. Drugs could be alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamines, hallucinogens, amphetamines, over the counter pain killers, etc. The next aspect of this pillar that must be explained is the term “recreational”. For use in this argument recreational will be seen as doing something for fun or because it feels good i.e. for recreation. Whether the use is habitual or sporadic does not matter, it is the fact that there are drugs being used which gives the argument merit.

Both of these pillars will be used to show how many college students are violating Kant’s 1st and 3rd formulation of his categorical imperative. Now I must qualify to an extent. This is not
an argument against Greek Life. Greek Life is a great organization that contributes to collegiate society in many aspects, especially philanthropically. Fraternities and Sororities raise large sums of money for many philanthropic organizations. Also the brotherhood and sisterhood that is promoted in these organizations is very benevolent to those involved, and changes a lot of people for the better. Greek Life has its merits, but it also has its faults, and some faults deserved to be brought to attention and looked at through a lens that perhaps has not been looked through.

*The Formulations Applied to the 2 Pillars.*

The first pillar that will be examined is Greek Life. Greek organizations can be divided into two groups, fraternities and sororities. The former will be examined first. There are many social norms of fraternities. If one word was to be used to describe the social dogma that comes with being in a fraternity that word would most likely be “masculinity” (Martin). Many fraternity brothers are obsessed with seeming masculine or manly. They tend to act in ways which mirror others around them. If their cohorts are chugging a beer or hazing another brother, odds are they will do the same. This is due to the fear of being seen as “wimpy, feminine, or homosexual” (Martin). A number of fraternity members are justifying their actions on the ground that everyone else is doing the same action. If this maxim, which holds that one shall act in accordance with the actions of those around him, is universalized as the first formulation calls for, the result would be a state of great discord. Suppose that in a world where this maxim was a universal rule, my peers go around destroying cars with sledge-hammers, and then according to this maxim I must do the same. This motivation for my behavior would seem morally permissible in this world, showing that a world where this maxim is universalized is a very undesirable world. This shows that college students are not acting in accordance with Kant’s categorical imperative because if this maxim is universalized, the result would not be a preferred
one. The next dynamic of fraternities that can be seen as a violation of the categorical imperative is the process of pledging. This process is the way a young man attempts to become a brother in a fraternity. The pledge can be subject to lewd amounts of hazing and other emotional and physical distress. In Martin and Hummer’s “Fraternities and Rape on Campus” a first person account of pledging is offered with key phrases like “those guys are sick”, “they like to see you suffer” showing the harsh realities of this aspect of fraternities. The act of hazing is in direct violation of the 3rd formulation of the categorical imperative. Fraternity brothers are using the pledges as a mere means for their pleasure. By forcing pledges to partake in heinous acts, regardless of the physical or emotional turmoil, the brothers are not treating the pledges as ends at all, the pledges are just mere means of enjoyment or pleasure. The pledges are getting nothing in return while the brothers are getting the only ones gaining satisfaction from hazing. The same things, besides the hazing argument, can be said about sororities. Their members are motivated to act along the exact same maxim that fraternities do. Thus they too are violating primarily the first formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative.

Recreational drug use is perhaps one of the biggest problems on college campuses today. This is the leading reason for its inclusion in this essay. The fact that so many students are participating in the use of drugs, legal or illegal, exhibits telltale signs that college students are lacking in their abilities to act with a notion of goodwill. Alcohol is the leading culprit of drug use, with 82 percent of college students drinking at least once (College Drinking). When college students consume drugs they directly violate the third formulation of the categorical imperative. They are using their own bodies (which are members of humanity) as a mere means for pleasure. There is no end to justify the means of using their bodies for pleasure. They are not benefitting at all. There is no beneficial end to using drugs. By the end of this year 159,000 freshmen are
expected to drop out of college due to drug abuse. Their actions are hurting their friends, families, professors, and many others. This past year 22% of students failed an exam due to drug use, 31% have missed a class due to the lingering effects of drugs, and an overwhelming 90% of rapes that occur on college campuses are fueled by drugs. These statistics speak for themselves. College students who participate in recreational drug use are not using themselves or others as a means and an end. They are treating themselves as mere means of pleasure which directly violates the first formulation of the categorical imperative.

Objection.

One possible objection to my argument, is the fact that I may be asking too much of college students, when saying that they should take a Kantian approach to their actions. By applying the 1st and 3rd formulations guidelines I am leaving no room for college students to be “college students”, meaning that I am not letting college learn from the typical college student mistakes of drinking too much, partying too hard, using too much drugs, and not studying enough. In a way it can be argued that I am inhibiting their moral growth. I am not letting them learn right from wrong through trial and error. College students should be allowed to make mistakes and learn from them. By forcing them to abide by Kantian guidelines they are not making mistakes and therefore not really learning. Instead of learning right from wrong they are being told what is right from wrong.

Response.

The response to this objection is a very simple one. If college students are taught how act according to Kantian guidelines they will not have to make the typical college mistakes. I am not asking too much of the collegiate society, all that my argument is asking is for college students to
stop violating the rules of Kantian ethics. College does not need to be full of mistakes. If it is possible for a college student not to make typical college mistakes by adhering to the guidelines of the 1st and 3rd categorical imperatives then it only makes logical sense for the possibility to be made a reality.

Contribution.

This paper offers a new perspective of looking at the collegiate landscape. When examining the negative aspects of college life, aspects like Greek Life and recreational drug use, many tend to take a consequentialist approach to saying what is right and wrong. The consequentialist approach consists of looking at the results of actions and how much happiness is created from the actions. The action that creates the most happiness is considered to be the right action, and the action that creates unhappiness is considered wrong. The perspective that my paper introduces is a perspective that is not looked through frequently partly due to the difficulty of understanding it. By using Kant’s categorical imperative, I am judging the rightness and wrongness of actions based upon the motivations behind the actions. By looking at what drives the actions you can foresee the consequences. Kant’s categorical imperative is often used to explain why we should not lie, cheat, steal, murder, etc. Never before has it been used to explain why college students should not haze, drink, or do drugs. These actions were seen as bad because of their status of being illegal. My paper throws the legality of these actions out the window and merely focuses on the morality of said actions. By using a philosophical principle to argue against certain aspects of collegiate society the wrongness of certain actions that college students take no longer rest just on legal grounds but now also rest on moral ones. Therefore the reason to partake in a mass reformation of the collegiate landscape could not be stronger. Many see college as a place where making mistakes is seen as okay or permissible. Sadly this is not the case. No
longer can college be seen this way. The violations of the first and third categorical imperatives are becoming more and more frequent in college students today. Instead of college being a place where mistakes are made, it should be a place where student’s morals are strengthened and prepared for the real world.

If one thing can be taken from this paper I hope it is the fact that even though college students are currently violating the first and third formulations of the categorical imperative they do not have to be in violation forever. There is a solution. It is simple. Education. By teaching college students the philosophical principles that are defined and examined in this paper, the mistakes can be avoided. Perhaps a new collegiate society can be created, one where Greek Life has no dark side, where recreational drug use won’t be so widespread not because of the legal consequences but because of the moral ones. This has to start somewhere, so why not at this university? It’s time to make the possibilities become reality.


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