FORMALISM

Formalism is the view that theoretical information about an object, or practical guidance about how to treat it, are to be derived from attention to its form rather than its matter or content. The idea originates in ancient Greek metaphysics. Plato (c. 430--347 B.C.) argued that to understand an object is to grasp the forms in which it "participates." Aristotle (384--322 B.C.) developed this theory by contrasting the form of an object to its matter. In Aristotle's account, the form of an object is its functional construction, the arrangement of the matter or parts which enables it to serve its purpose or engage in those activities which are essential to it. The members of a species all have the same form, while each individual has its own particular matter.

An area of study is therefore "formal" to the extent that it focuses on the structural and functional properties that instances of a type have in common and derives its conclusions from those alone. Logic and mathematics, for example, are considered formal because they are concerned with the way certain forms of argument and calculation work, without regard to what those arguments or calculations are about.

In other areas the appropriateness of formalistic thinking is more controversial, and in modern philosophy a debate has arisen about formalism in ethics. Most people agree that there is a formal aspect to the idea of justice. Justice demands that we "treat like cases alike" and "treat equals as equals." But philosophers disagree about the extent to which any practical guidance can be derived from such formal considerations, and about the appropriateness of appealing to them in other areas of ethical life.

The debate began with criticisms leveled by G.W.F. Hegel (1770--1831) at the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724--1804). Kant argued that in order to determine whether an action is right, we should attend to the form of the "maxim" or principle on which the agent proposes to act. The categorical imperative tells us to act only on maxims which can serve as universal laws. Suppose an agent proposes to perform a certain action in order to realize a certain end. We should ask whether everyone with this end could rationally act on this maxim. Some maxims would be contradictory or self-defeating if everyone

acted on them, and these are ruled out by morality. Since the question is whether the action and the purpose, the "matter" of the maxim, can be combined in a principle which can function as a universal law, it is a question about the maxim's functional construction --- in the Aristotelian sense, its form.

Debates about the formalism of this procedure for testing maxims arise at two levels. First, questions may be raised about whether the categorical imperative really is a formal principle. Kant claimed that maxims must have the form of a law, but his procedure seems to require that maxims have the form of a law for human beings who live together in community. This additional specification might be thought of as an appeal to content. Relatedly, questions are raised about whether a purely formal principle can have any determinate application. Hegel and his followers argued that the categorical imperative is an "empty formalism" which by itself tells us nothing about what we ought to do. The procedure fails to rule out any maxims, or fails to sort maxims correctly. In contemporary philosophy, feminists and communitarians have echoed these criticisms, arguing that in concrete ethical situations the important question is not what any human being ought to do, but what a member of a particular community or family or a particular person's friend ought to do. Attention to particular content is necessary. Kantians deny that these are objections: in assuming that there are certain ways in which friends, family members, or community members as such ought to act, the critics are implicitly relying on formal and universal considerations. The debate about the extent to which formal considerations govern ethical thinking thus remains unsettled.

See Also: Aristotle; Feminism; Hegel; Justice; Kant.

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