



ETHICAL IMPLICATION OF THE KANTIAN NOTION OF MORAL AUTONOMY: AN EVALUATION

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Abstract: Immanuel Kant is a remarkable figure, a landmark in the history of philosophy. This paper is an attempt to present the concept of moral autonomy and its significance as normative ideal in the background of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant's concept of autonomy, specifically moral autonomy, is based on good will and categorical imperative. Good will creates the foundation of his moral philosophy. A person ought to perform his duty out of good will which acts as the motive and is an end in itself. This is an a priori concept in Kantian ethics. This is inextricably related with the idea of 'categorical imperative' which is the foundation of Kant's concept of duty. The categorical imperative mainly consists of three formulae, (i) formula of universalizability, (ii) formula of humanity; (iii) formula of autonomy. The third formula of autonomy is a derivation of the previous two, and closely linked with them. The authors in this paper argue that in spite of being a rigid ideal of morality, and with apparent difficulties, the moral autonomy plays a crucial role in a person's moral life by upholding the fundamental values. It also sustains the values of dignity, humanity and helps to build a harmonious world.

Index Terms - Autonomy, Categorical Imperative, Good Will, Humanity, Kant, Universalizability.

I. INTRODUCTION

Kant's moral theory advocates the concept of 'Good Will' instead of depending on the consequence. Good will is good in and of itself, as it enables the agent to choose his action by himself. Autonomy is a species of practical freedom according to Kant. However, the ability to choose is fundamental in understanding the concept of autonomy in Kantian philosophy. The good will is motivated by reason and it consists of free will. One has to consider that Kant in his *Groundwork* distinguishes between *ends* and *means*, between *motives* and *incentives*. Question may arise: Can a motive be considered as incentive? In this respect, Kant's position is very clear. We are not to be moved or pushed merely by incentives, since we are rational beings.¹ Incentive may push an agent to a particular end, or to treat something as her end, but it should not be regarded as the criterion of end. Kant emphasizes on the good will of human beings which is a priori in nature. The reason that mere end should not be regarded as the prime factor is that in the objective sense the duties should be based on such maxim which is to be universalized. In this regard, we should not act on the basis of consequences of the action, rather the duty has to be done for the sake of duty alone.

The prime facet of Kantian morality is the concept of 'categorical imperative'. Unlike a hypothetical imperative, categorical imperative denies any sort of exception to the rule. The hypothetical imperative provides an option to consider for some exception, while the categorical imperative does not give any space for alternative except any act motivated by the good will. Therefore, any incentive even if that motivates someone towards a particular end will not be regarded as categorical imperative, as the incentive could be variably different in different contexts. The preservation of the good will is essential for bearing an action dictated by reason. Categorical imperative is about the sense of moral obligation that a person should fulfill, while at the same time to be universalized as a moral principle.

II. METHODOLOGY

The authors have critically examined Kant's idea of moral autonomy in the background of his concepts of good will and categorical imperative. For this, relevant books including text and reference works have been studied and conceptual as well as philosophical analysis have been done.

III. MORAL AUTONOMY IN KANTIAN ETHICS: THE VALUE OF CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

The concept of moral autonomy is pivotal in Kant's moral philosophy. The autonomous person is able to exercise free will and reason, is not guided or motivated by any external influence or inclination. The moral laws within the self motivate a person to act morally and at the same time his rational capacity gives him the power to legislate the moral law for himself. He ought to act in accordance with the moral law in himself and as required by reason.

The concept of duty is of paramount importance in Kantian ethics. We may sometimes think that duty is cited so rigidly by Kant, but without this rigidity the notion of categorical imperative does not even stand on any firm ground. Whatever we do or be our social status, duty under the universal law has to be performed. In this respect Jens Timmermann remarks:

“Kant's conception of duty lacks many of the unpalatable connotations that the word might evoke in today's readers. It is important to keep this in mind. What human beings ought to do is not grounded in their social rank or station. After all, the moral law is universal. It is a result of one's status as a rational being amongst others. Moreover, in the last consequence we freely impose the law of duty upon ourselves – which is the definition of Kantian autonomy.”²

The law-giving capacity is not an easy task for a person. There are many inclinations, self interest which could motivate someone to act in accordance with what his senses want or his inclinations. For example, self-love could be considered as a crux issue here. The problem is when a person is guided by self-love, sometimes his inclinations may bring good result but often it could result to be disastrous. The reason is that there are no moral restrictions, and it could make the moral law subordinate. According to Andrews Reath,

“Self-love is a concern for well-being which modifies an inclination only when it conflicts with one's overall happiness. It is opposed to the moral disposition, not due to the inclinations involved, but because it recognizes no moral restrictions. The inclinations may be good in that they can ground morally permissible ends, when properly limited. But in recognizing no moral restrictions, self-love makes the moral law a subordinate principle.”³

One may claim that his self-esteem should be upheld at all times. But the matter remains to be seen as to whether this claim comes out of an egoistic predicament, or inclinations for personal interest. This would not be morally worthy in accordance with Kantian ethics if the egoistic predicament of self-love out of inclination is preferred by the individual, even if it produces apparently good moral outcome. Very often this sort of inclination makes way for incentives also, which is another obstacle to make an action morally worthy. Respect for oneself and at the same time respect for others makes the agent worthy of appreciation. Moreover, one should always treat the humanity as an end, not merely as a means only. This is, in fact, the second formula of Kant's categorical imperative. This sense of respect is a result of the moral consciousness and is justified by one's possession of rational and moral capabilities.⁴ This is not a case where one prefers some people instead of others, rather the sense of moral autonomy creates this understanding of mutual respect.

Reasons that stem from the pure will (or practical reason) are considered more valuable or important than those that stem from the incentive provided by desire are inclination. According to Kant, a good will acts from duty instead of any inclination. This is the basic assumption of Kant as far as morality is concerned. Acting for duty's sake alone makes one autonomous provided that he or she is guided by reasons. Here one thing should be taken into consideration – the moral agent has to understand the difference between hypothetical imperative and categorical imperative. Both imperatives are concerned with our duties. But whereas, hypothetical imperative is conditional and subjective, categorical imperative is unconditional and objective. Kant's focus is on categorical imperative while he develops his theory of morality. Categorical imperative is valid for every rational being where the end of the action is not the concern. But when we talk about the hypothetical imperative, the condition or end result is the primary objective. For example, if we want to promote vegetarianism we must abandon eating meat. The relationship between means and end is based on some calculation or condition in this case. But if we say that speaking the truth is our primary duty, there is no question of any condition, instead this is universally valid and categorical. The first formula of categorical imperative according to Kant is as follows:

“Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal.”⁵

Ethics is concerned with our practical reason. Accordingly, some actions will be good when the imperatives say that there are some possible or actual purposes which will be met by those actions, provided that these are represented by practical rule. These actions are primarily based on conditions and the imperatives are hypothetical.

The idea of categorical imperative is based on certain conduct and there is no special purpose or condition associated with this. This categorical imperative is considered ‘moral’ by Kant because of its a priori and unconditional nature. It is also considered as universal because it implies the laws of morality. Regarding the nature of categorical imperative Kant remarks:

“It has to do not with the matter of the action and what is to result from it, but with the form and the principle from which the action itself follows; and the essentially good in the action^s consists in the disposition, let the result be what it may. This imperative may be called the imperative **of morality**.”⁶

Kant does not accord autonomy to any natural fact as it is not something performed for a reason. The sense of moral autonomy is not dependent upon experience, but on reason. This makes the Kantian autonomy a unique a priori concept. Dignity or respect has a very essential role in Kant's formulation of categorical imperative. Since the idea of categorical imperative promotes autonomy, it is important to recognize that one should always respect himself as well as others and should treat humanity as an end-in-itself. This brings us to his second formula of categorical imperative which is as follows:

“So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.”⁷

Kant defines “humanity” as “the capacity to set oneself an end”, he thinks of moral personality as “the idea of humanity considered wholly intellectually”. The individual ought to set ends and reasons on the basis of “formal” rather than “material”

principles if he is a moral one. He will act on the basis of practical reason, instead of any sensuous inclinations, interests and incentives. Only then he will be able to claim to be a morally autonomous being.

In the second formula Kant promotes dignity and respect towards humanity in an unconditional way. Humanity or 'rational nature' is the only suitable candidate for the proposition 'end in itself'. This formula of humanity, we should note, is also in accordance with the first formula of categorical imperative, i.e. formula of universality. Here we should also focus on the term 'merely' that is used in the second formula of categorical imperative. It implies that a person is not entirely an end for another, he or she is a means also. For example, when a student goes to a teacher for learning something then the teacher acts as a means towards achieving the purpose of learning, in that sense he is obviously a means. But the student should also bear in mind that the teacher should not *merely* be treated as a means, the dignity and respect of the teacher as a human being ought to be treated always as the end. This is the reason also for not committing suicide, as the agent in such a case is violating the respect towards himself and that is not universalizable also.

Kant depends on the 'objective end' rather than the 'relative end' to reach the categorical imperative. The relative end is based on the agent's inclination or interest, but the objective end is based on the rational nature that is independent of any inclinations, neither it looks for any predetermined goal or purpose to be achieved. But there must be some end which is not dependent on any personal inclinations – that end is the 'end in itself'. This end has to be realized by the reason of the moral agent, as also a reason for action regardless of any inclinations.⁸

The formula of autonomy is related to the previous two formulae of categorical imperative and humanity. Here Kant emphasizes on the idea of lawgiving aspect of man. Only a rational being can give law, and the law has to be universalizable in nature. The first and second formulae are "closer to intuition". According to Sally Sedgwick, "The second formula, FH, captures the idea that the object that has unconditional value is rational nature. The third formula, FA, specifies the basis of the unconditional worth of rational nature"⁹ Having authority over one's actions is one aspect, but Kant's formula of autonomy essentially requires that the will of a rational being is the will that gives universal law. Every being should respect this feature of the unconditional worth of autonomy of a human being. This formula applies that a human being has to respect his own self and others as autonomous. Kant expresses this in the following way:

"Act only so that the will could regard itself as at the same time giving universal law through its maxim."¹⁰

Kant aims to explain that every human will necessarily accepts the categorical imperative as valid because of its universalizability. The categorical imperative is a priori and must be connected with the concept of the rational will. In this respect, Sally Sedgwick remarks:

"What we learned from his analysis of the concept of a rational will was, first, that that concept refers to a will that is pure rather than empirical. We learned, second, that the pure will, for Kant, is the capacity of a rational being to give itself law, the capacity he identifies as "autonomy" (433). Finally, we learned that since the law that all rational natures give themselves is valid for all rational natures, its command for finite rational natures is categorical rather than hypothetical. The law that the will of a finite rational being gives itself, then, is the categorical imperative."¹¹

IV. MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONCEPT OF GOOD WILL

When it comes to the will and its self-governing rule, Kant does not talk about any externally imposed principle or law, rather the agent is himself the law-giving and law-abiding one. Being obedient to an externally imposed law is heteronomy, and being obedient to self-imposed law is autonomy. But here autonomy is not just a self-imposed rule, but is connected with the practical reason or moral authority of man. The question is, how one should demonstrate the law? The law is synthetic as it seems in Kant, and the demonstration of the law is also synthetic rather than analytic. Although this is an obscure part of his *Groundwork*, still the synthetic nature of law and its demonstration cannot be discarded. The hypothetical imperative is conditional, and therefore analytic; while the categorical imperative is unconditional and therefore synthetic. There is no set or presupposed end in the case of categorical imperative, but in the hypothetical imperative the end or goal of the action is already presupposed. According to Kant, one knows in advance the end or purpose of his action when he is guided by categorical imperative.¹² This perplexity remains for the reader, but this also brings us to the idea where Kant treats autonomy as 'closer to intuition'.

The essential factor regarding the categorical imperative is its universalizability principle. The maxim on which the agent acts, it has to be willed that at the same time it become universal. In this perspective, value in terms of any acceptable consequence is not the objective, instead the sense of duty in accordance with good will is the primary concern. According to Jens Timmermann:

"Morally good action is not action for the sake of some perceived value. However, the notion of a good will as rooted in common moral thought is central to the *Groundwork*. Action that proceeds from a sense of duty is the paradigm case of good human willing; and Kant returns to the theme of the good will time and again throughout the book."¹³

The third formula of categorical imperative which is the formula of autonomy is essentially connected with the previous two formulae and is based on the unconditional worth of rational nature. The law giving ability is something that only a rational nature can have. In this formula the objective of categorical imperative becomes fulfilled, and the moral agent also achieves the completeness as a rational nature by taking duty as an end. The moral autonomy of the individual is the utmost factor in Kantian ethics.

In Kant's formulation of categorical imperative, good will has a supreme value. An action, whether it is moral or immoral, depends on whether it is done with good will or bad will. The motive of the action is most important according to Kant. A morally good character must have good will and this is the highest good, good in itself. This good will motivates or acts as the driving force behind the agent's duty, especially when someone acts duty for the sake of duty alone.

While performing a duty one must act out of good will. Good will, according to Kant, is an end-in-itself and essential for his development of the notion of categorical imperative. The categorical imperative is an idea which is not much explicitly articulated by Kant. While talking about good will he makes a distinct approach towards the duty that a man ought to do. A person, when he performs a duty ought to perform this based on his or her good will. This is the fundamental motive behind any action, as this is the end-in-itself. Therefore, it cannot be defined on the basis of any experience. The concept of good will is foundational in Kant's moral philosophy. On the other, when a person acts based on the hypothetical imperative then he is not guided by the supreme principle. Here supreme principle implies the maxim that is universalizable.

V. CONCLUSION

Kant's theory inescapably runs into some problems. Kant's deontological basis for morality ignores the role of consequences. While we can't have any control over the results of our actions with certainty, however, consequences have some relevance to determining how we should always act. Secondly, Kant's theory, as absolutist, allows no exceptions and then does not appear to resolve any sort of moral dilemma. Thirdly, it seems possible to characterize the identical act by different maxims. Because a number of these maxims could also be rationally universalizable whereas we are left with uncertainty to decide on whether the act itself should be judged right or wrong. Finally, thanks to Kant's emphasis upon persons as rational free agents, his theory seems unable to accord sufficient respect for human infants, children et al who lack autonomy. The idea applies only to rational agents. It might fail to apply to non-humans or to humans without rational capacity, e.g., humans with brain malfunctioning, illness or persistent vegetative coma. The theory also cannot resolve conflicts between duties: (i) between two perfect duties, (ii) between a perfect duty and an imperfect duty.

In spite of these difficulties Kant's concept of duty and categorical imperative has championed the field of moral autonomy, and has taken the idea of moral autonomy forward to build up a remarkable approach towards the intrinsic value of moral behaviour of human beings. According to Thomas May:

"Kant discussed autonomy in terms of man's moral character, and so was concerned with man's control over the moral value of his actions. Thus, his discussion of autonomy does not center upon the practical determination of action, but upon the formal determination of the moral value of action. Kant's conception of autonomy, however, has influenced modern accounts of the autonomous determination of practical action, which have taken the Kantian idea of moral autonomy and developed notions of autonomous practical reasoning in Kantian terms."¹⁴

If we underestimate the value of the categorical imperative, if we don't recognize "telling the truth" or "keeping the promise" as categorical imperatives, then the entire humanity will face anarchy. Logically it will follow that the intrinsic value of speaking the truth and promise-keeping act become obsolete if these are not regarded as categorical imperatives. Actually, closely following Kant's theory of autonomy we will find out that he leaves no scope for moral dilemma. In his theory, formulation of the *principles* of one's action is more important than the formulation of the *content* of one's action, and there is no external contingent factor to determine the moral value of an action.¹⁵

Therefore, the consequence of an action also is not the objective, rather it has to be determined by good will of a rational being in order to be morally autonomous. The moral autonomy of a person is the intrinsic value that determines whether any action is morally worthy or not. The person with a sense of moral autonomy should not deviate from the categorical imperative while performing his duty, according to Kant. He may act deviating from this, but that action will not be considered of having any moral worth. Overall, if we assess the value of Kantian notion of moral autonomy and categorical imperative, we find that its a priori feature adds a great value to the history of morality. The inbuilt law of morality in rational beings, i.e. human beings, gives us the foundation to act in accordance with moral laws – not to kill innocent beings, to uphold the promise and truth etc. Even though Kant's theory appears as a rigid one, the 'goodness' of our good will makes the road for a better world to live. It may seem to be utopian to many, but if we try to practice or cultivate some of its basic concerns if not all, we will be able to create a world consisting of harmony, mutual respect and peace.

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