

FORMULATIONS OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

In this paper I would be considering the inter-relationship between the various formulations of Kant's categorical imperative and would be examining some modern attempts to understand Kant's ethics. This I shall do with reference to a passage in Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*.

In the *Metaphysics of Morals* in proposition 63 Kant writes : "The three modes of presenting the principle of morality that have been adduced are at bottom only so many formulas of the very same law, and each of itself involves the other two. There is, however, a difference in them; but it is rather subjectively than objectively practical, intended namely to bring an idea of the reason nearer to intuition (by means of a certain analogy), and thereby nearer to feeling. All maxims, in fact, have-

1. A *form*, consisting in universality, and in this view the formula of the moral imperative is expressed, thus, that the maxims must be so chosen as if they were to serve as universal laws of nature.
2. A *matter*, namely, an end, and here the formula says that the rational being, as it is an end by its own nature and therefore an end in itself, must in every maxim serve as the condition limiting all merely relative and arbitrary ends.
3. A *complete characterization* of all maxims by means of that formula, namely, that all maxims ought by their own legislation to harmonise with a possible kingdom of ends as with a kingdom of nature (67). There is a progress here in

the order of the categories of *unity* of the form of the will (its universality), *plurality* of the matter (the objects, i. e. the ends), and *totality* of the system of these. In forming our moral *judgement* of actions it is better to proceed always on the strict method, and start from the general formula of the categorical imperative: *Act according to maxim which can at the same time make itself a universal law*. If, however, we wish to gain an *entrance* for the moral law, it is useful to bring one and the same action under three specified conceptions, and thereby as far as possible to bring it nearer to intuition".¹

Here we shall consider three problems. First, we shall find out how different formulations of the categorical imperative are expressions of the same law. Secondly, we shall consider as to how any of the formulas involves rest of them. Thirdly, we shall examine whether the maxims are only subjectively practical and not objectively so.²

When Kant suggests that they are so many formulas of the very same law, a question arises namely, what is the same law, of which they are variant expressions? Are they expressions of any one of the formulations or are they expressions of a particular formulation? Or, are they different expressions of something different from them? It does not seem that they are expressions of any particular formulation amongst themselves, because otherwise Kant would have said so. But they also do not appear to be versions of something that is totally different and not implied in the different formulations as Kant talks of them as formulations of the same law. Hence, there has to be something common which is applicable to all of them. It seems that Kant never clearly mentions or explains what that law is of which these imperatives are formulae. This may be because the formulae under consideration are the logical expressions of the

law which itself may refer to a law which is logical in nature.⁸ Or else, the relation between the different imperatives and the law may be a logical relation. Even in this situation the name of that law could have been given but that also is not given by Kant, perhaps because the law may be such that it is more than an abstract principle. The only thing that one can comprehend is its incomprehensibility. That one can comprehend this but cannot name it signifies the extreme limit of moral inquiry. With the result, only the form of that law could be given and not the content of it.

Moreover, Kant does not seem to be primarily concerned with the actual practice of morality but rather with the form of moral law and thus considered, irrespective of whether a particular formulation of the law states universalizability or autonomy, each one seems to bring forth the same result. That is, each one seems to be oriented towards the same goal; and the goal is explanation of the moral action. Hence the moral law which Kant talks of is already implied in the formulation. Therefore, all the formulations are interrelated. They have to be considered together. Universalizability, humanity, kingdom of ends are different aspects of moral action and when we consider them together, then only we realize that in order to do a moral action we have to follow all of them. So even if any one of them is a law, the result would be the same.

The way this is so could be seen if one knows how each of them involves the others. If any maxim does not satisfy the first formulation, for example the principle of universalizability, it also would not satisfy other formulations viz., the principle of dignity of human being and the principle autonomy. As a matter of fact they are interrelated because each one of them follows from the sense of duty. It is the sense duty that subsumes the

principles of universalizability, autonomy and the membership of a kingdom of ends under it.

The first formulation is as follows : "*Act as if the maxim of thy action were to become by thy will a universal law of nature*".⁴ This principle suggests that any action worth the name must be such that it should be done by any moral being placed under the same (similar) situation. It is important, however, to note that something is followed or practised by everybody does not in itself determine the morality of the action under consideration. Thus, exploitation or dishonesty could become a universal phenomenon but thereby they cannot become a moral principle, since they cannot be said to emerge out of the sense of duty, which in addition to universalizability, includes certain other elements like autonomy or dignity of human being.

The second formulation is as follows : "*So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only*".⁵ To treat oneself as an end and also others (although Kant does not seem to explain as to what it is to treat oneself and others as ends!) will be practicable only when it is supplemented by other principles. If one were to treat oneself an end, it seems odd if not impossible not to treat others as ends. Similarly, if one were to treat others as ends, having their own dignity and self respect, one also could not treat oneself but as a human being who has self respect and dignity. So treating oneself as an end necessitates universalizability of that principle. It is only when all the members of the human race are willingly committed to the principle that all human beings are equally free, will there be a possibility of human treatment being accorded to everybody. One should know that just as he is free he also has a responsibility not to encroach upon the freedom of others. It is the awareness of being a member of society that would bestow the sense of responsibility due to

which adoption of the second principle becomes not only possible but inevitable as well. Actually, the second principle involves two different and yet closely related principles : that of the dignity of human beings and of freedom or autonomy.⁶ Both of them seem to preserve the moral character of the second principle.

The third and the last formulation is as follows : Kant writes "Hence follows the third practical principle of the will, which is the ultimate condition of its harmony with the universal practical reason, viz., the idea of *the will of every rational being as a universally legislative will*",⁷ and "this conception leads to another which depends on it and yet is very fruitful, namely, that of a *kingdom of ends*".⁸

By kingdom Kant understands the union of different rational beings in a system by common laws. The ends are determined by laws and Kant says that by abstraction from personal differences of rational beings as also from the different content of their private ends it is possible to conceive all ends combined in a systematic whole. Here also, the very conception of kingdom of ends seems to rest on the principle of dignity of human beings, universalizability and autonomy. Unless one is aware of one's own position in the context of a certain framework, true application to humanity at large is very difficult and any such application of it would obviously involve universalizability.

In this manner, all the principles seem really to be different versions of the moral law. Practising any one of them necessarily seems to mean practising only and hence all of them, so much so that one cannot conceive any one of them in isolation of the rest of them. One formulation involves the others.

But what is meant by saying that the maxims are subjectively rather than objectively practical? Kant seems to suggest that even though universalizability may stand for the unity of the

form of will, the ends may apparently at least be different in different contexts so that certain maxims are subjectively practical rather than objectively so. This means that even though they are formulations of the same law, the particular formulation to be followed may depend upon the person concerned.

Nevertheless, the subjective practicability of the principle under consideration does not mean that the principle itself is subjective. It rather means that the use of the principle is itself subjective. It is possible to practise certain principle but not the other. It is practical from the point of view of the agent or the subject.

Now, if the choice of the particular principle of action is made by a person concerned and not on the ground of something else, a question can be raised as to why we can't have many formulations of the law. If the formulations are different on the level of maxims or subjective principles of action why not have as many formulations as possible?

This is not possible because all these are ultimate versions of the same law and in so far as they are so, they are one. They are oriented towards the same goal. Any of them may be in use and still the result will be the same. With the result, the maxims are not practical objectively. At the most, one can talk about the different elements like for example the will, the agent, the consequences of a moral act.⁹

Yet, these elements do not refer to different kinds of moral acts. The different aspects are felt by subjects or agents. Thus the issue about the number of formulations is not all that important because whatever number of principles one can conceive of they are ultimately principles that lead to the same law. Whether you follow this or that formulation of the categorical imperative

does not objectively make any difference, it is a matter of subjective choice.

One thing should be made clear that though these various formulations are at bottom one it does not mean that they could be reduced to any one of them. Each one of the formulations illuminates a different aspect of moral act. The principle of universality may suggest that one is not only a member of a natural world but there is in him the awareness that one is capable of acknowledging the order in the universe and also capable of creating similar order in one's own life. This principle suggests the possibility that any moral principle must be such that it could in principle be adopted by every rational human being.

The second principle, the end in itself, implies that morality is not only an individual or a personal matter but it necessarily involves reference to other human beings and hence it precludes the possibility of coercion and exploitation. And, in so far as every human being is free, moral law is not something enforced on man but it is man who freely opts for a moral life and hence creates laws for maintaining the individual and social good. Thus, freedom and awareness of the dignity of others go together. Freedom ultimately is transformed into binding oneself willingly to social life.

The last principle involves reference to an ideal community which is a systematic unity of different rational beings under common laws. It suggests the truly democratic form of life wherein people rationally evolve common laws and obey them because laws are made by them and not forced upon them. The morality of an action consists in relation of that act to the making of a law.

All these formulations are descriptive of the different aspects or elements of the moral action and as such are necessarily distinct, irreducible to one another. They are also irreducible to some other different aspect which is not mentioned in the formulations under consideration but that they are in this way irreducible does not imply that they are unrelated or disjoint. They are necessarily related in the sense that one involves the other. Granted that they are so related, the next issue that needs attention is why and how does Kant speak of the form, the matter and the complete characterisation of maxims by the principle of kingdom of ends. What does he mean by form and matter of all maxims?

When he refers to the content, he refers to the form of the content and not the actual content itself, and that is why what it is to be end in itself is never made clear. The maxim of 'end in itself' does not state the content but the form of the content. To treat oneself or the other person as an end is to be aware that everyone has dignity as a human being. But one cannot define dignity because dignity is expressed differently in different contexts. In the political context it is expressed through the idea of individual liberty. In the social context it is exemplified through humane treatment. There could be infinite ways of degrading human dignity but still it is very difficult to give the contents of human dignity. The contents will vary according to the time, place and other circumstances but the form of human dignity will remain the same. The same thing can be said about the other maxims. Only the form of maxim can be given, the actual details of the maxims can never be given specifically and once for all.

Similarly, when he refers to maxims having a form, he is referring to the necessity of universalizability of that form. In other words, he suggests that a certain kind of form should be

universalized. So that, given a formal criterion or standard one can decide whether the maxim is a moral principle or not.

Lastly, he speaks of complete characterizability of all maxims by means of the last formula of the kingdom of ends. This characterization is also a formal characterization or standard by which only the form of such a kingdom of ends could be given. The content or details of what it is to be the kingdom of ends is not explicitly stated. It is with the help of such characterization that the unity of form of will and the plurality of the ends is brought under the notion of moral law.

If this way of understanding the categorical imperatives is right then it is also necessary to point out that some of the modern attempts to raise certain issues about the categorical imperative seem to be misleading and inappropriate. It is not my purpose to take note of all such possible accounts. But for the sake of illustration we can refer to some of them.¹⁰ One such attempt is to hold that one formulation is fundamental and others are derived. For example, it is suggested that one formula of universalizability is fundamental and the rest of them could be deduced or derived from the principle of universalizability.¹¹

Now, granted that all the formulations are interrelated and one involves the other, no formulation can be said to be more fundamental and no formulation can be said to be derived from any other. For, following any one of them is tantamount to following any other of them. All of them are formulations of the same law and hence related but not in terms of hierarchy. All of them are equally important and significant.

It also seems that Kant has never raised such an issue of some formula being held to be more fundamental and others

being derivative. And he is right in not raising such issues at all.

Another such account is to treat them as only anthropological illustrations (to treat them as less precise anthropological formulations) of the moral law.

This amounts to reformulating the moral law from the standpoint of the sensuous agent. Thus understood, the formula of end in itself or the kingdom of ends turns out to be the outcome of a subjective understanding on the part of man and every such formulation would perhaps suggest a different kind of understanding of the moral law.

Even this attempt is needless. For, Kant himself says that various formulations are *subjectively practical*. This does not mean that they are *subjective*; nor does it mean that they are understood subjectively. What is suggested is that their *use* is subjectively determined; determined by an agent. So, what is different is the *use* and not the *substance* of the moral law.

The last problem is to find out whether the categorical imperative suggests an exercise in analysis or whether Kant really wanted to give moral advice. The same old problem of form and content of the moral seems to reappear in a different manner – whether it suggests a criterion for any moral rule. Apparently it suggests a negative criterion, but in terms of the nature of act Kant does give a general idea of the nature of a moral act. He does refer to autonomy, humanity and such other principles. Unless one has the general idea of the nature of moral act one cannot act morally. How this general idea is put into concrete is not shown, but the importance of ends is certainly emphasised.

Thus to conclude, different formulations of the categorical imperative are expressions of the same moral law and each formulation involves the others. Although their use is different and subjective, the formulations are not themselves subjective. Hence all such modern attempts to read some kind of subjective anthropology in Kant's ethics or to label him merely to be a deontologist seem to be misleading and hence untenable.¹²

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NOTES

1. Abbott T. K.; *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics*. Translated by Thomas Kinprill Abbott. Sixth edition. Longmans, Green and Co.
2. A maxim is a subjective principle of action and is distinguished from the objective principle i. e. law. It contains the practical rule set by reason. It is the principle on which the subject acts.
3. The law is not covered by formulae. It is also not deduced or derived from them either singly or collectively. The formulae are *logical* in the sense they provide a ground for the law. In a way any instance of formulae of the law is enough to give us an idea of moral law and the law may be logical in the sense it provides the ground of the possibility of moral action.
4. Abbott T. K.; *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works* (tr.) p. 39.
5. *Ibid.* p. 47.
6. Prof. Paton speaks about four versions of categorical imperative – (1) The formula of the law of nature. (2) The formula of the end in itself. (3) The formula of autonomy and (4) The formula of the

- kingdom of ends. Prof. Abbott on the other hand speaks of three formulations - (1) The formula of law of nature. (2) The formula of end in itself which includes human dignity and autonomy or freedom and (3) The formula of the kingdom of ends.
7. Abbott T. K.; *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works* translated by Abbott, p. 49.
 8. *Ibid*, p. 51.
 9. Here, Kant seems to be incorrect. He talks of different motives of an action and presumes as it were self-inclination and sense of duty may not go together. Different motives do not hint at different kinds of actions.
 10. For all such attempts one may refer to *Contemporary Philosophy : A New Survey* edited by Guttorm Floistad. Vol. III, *Philosophy of Action*. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, The Hague / Boston / London, 1982. See especially Rosevaer, "Kant's Practical Philosophy."
 11. Sometimes the various formulations are called transcendental reformulations of the formula of universalizability.
 12. I am thankful to Prof. K. J. Shah for discussing some points with me.