

KANT'S CONCEPTION OF RATIONAL ACTION

In Kant's ethics no statement has been put forward as a definition of rational action. But it is true that Kant had a definite idea about such an action because he is mainly concerned with rational actions in his ethics. So what exactly this idea was is to be found out from some of the passages in his works. For convenience, I shall choose one passage from his *Grundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* and try to consider what exactly his idea was. The passage is, "Everything in nature works in accordance with laws. Only a rational being has the power to act in accordance with his idea of laws – that is, in accordance with principles – and only so has he a will."¹ Here we can find his idea of a rational being and also by implication his idea of a rational action : A rational being is one who has the power to act in accordance with his idea of laws; and a rational action is that which is performed in accordance with the idea of a law or principle.

Let us analyse the definition, viz, "a rational act is that which is performed in accordance with the idea of a law or principle" and try to understand what the intended meaning of it is. We may say that the presence of an *idea of law*, and not just *law*, is necessary to exclude mechanical acts, reflexes, instinctive acts, etc. as non-rational activities, for they do occur in accordance with certain laws; only they are not done in accordance with the idea of law.² [For the time being let us forget the distinction between a law and a principle.³]

The definition, as it stands, would include only all rational actions of a human being and a holy will. A holy being, as viewed by Kant, has a purely rational will which presents him with universal rational laws. Whereas a human being has a will which is partly rational and partly natural, endowing him with both semi-rational and purely rational practical principles, all acts of a holy being are purely rational acts and there is no possibility for him to act irrationally or semi-rationally. The peculiarity of a human being is that he has a will which makes him capable of acting both in a purely rational and in a semi-rational manner. It is this which makes his acts worthy of moral considerations, worthy of being considered as responsible socially, politically, etc. And it is only the rational acts of a human being as products of the laws of a will that are open to moral evaluation. In his ethical works, Kant is found to be mainly concerned with such acts or conducts of human beings. From this, we may conclude that when Kant discussed rational acts in his ethics he had in his mind the idea of a rational act as that which is performed in accordance with the idea of the law of the will.

From the fact that the definition is to be given in terms of the idea of a law we can infer that a rational action cannot be defined in terms of a law *alone*. Nor, again, can a moral action be defined in terms of the nature of the individual who performs it. Because all his acts, such as reflexes, etc., cannot be said to be rational on the ground that they are done by a rational individual.

The Kantian idea of a rational act understood in the above way differs from that of his predecessors who are his opponents. They viewed a rational act as that which is performed in accordance with the idea of a desired end.⁴ But Kant replaced the

words 'desired end' by the word 'law'. But the apparent antithesis between these two ideas of a rational action may not be real. It may not be the case that those who characterise rational actions in terms of a desired end deny that such acts are performed on the idea of a law and he who holds that such acts are done on the idea of a law denies any desired end in those cases. The class of actions done on an idea of a law need not exclude that of actions done with a desired end. So, the question is, wherein lies the difference between these two conceptions of a rational action? Why did Kant talk about law instead of desired end?

There are two reasons. First, Kant has his own view of human will and its functions. Human will, according to him, is an impulse guided by reason.⁵ It is a faculty of desire as well as of reason. Reason, according to Kant, is one but it can function in two ways.⁶ It can function in determining the way of satisfying one's desires, inclinations, etc.; i.e., it provides rules for the attainment of its object. It is then practical and it is then a will.⁷ Kant, thus, identifies will with practical reason. In its theoretical aspect reason provides order and rules of possible experiences and as such gives knowledge of things as they appear to be. In its practical aspect reason provides laws for the satisfaction of desire and as such "...gives direction to the changes we introduce into this natural order by means of voluntary action."⁸ Reason, thus, shows the way by which an impulse is to be satisfied and in doing so it represents an act as a means to the attainment of it. This amounts to saying that an action is not a mere product of an impulse but also of a practical principle. But this is not all. For, reason has a more important function according to Kant and the unique aspect of Kant's approach lies in this. It is he who has firmly maintained that a law of action need not always be a law of satisfying a desire or

an impulse. The unique feature of practical reason consists not in the matter that it represents acts as merely means for the satisfaction of desire but in its ability to present universal practical principles.

Here, I shall make a little digression. Since Kant has identified will with practical reason which consists of practical principles we may introduce a slight change in the body of the definition by replacing the expression 'a law of a will' by the expression 'practical principle' since they are equivalent. Thus, the final definition of the rational action would be that "a rational act is that which is done in accordance with the idea of a practical principle."

This being the first reason for speaking of laws rather than desired ends in his account of rational action, the second reason is that, according to Kant, the prevailing notion of rational action presents a model of action which is inadequate. It is inadequate because it does not accommodate genuinely moral actions. The model presents a rational action as that the end of which must stand related with the agent as an object of his desire. That means, something, in order to become an object for a volition, must be related with the agent in one way, viz. that the agent desires it. In other words, for a volition, the object *O* always stands as the object of desire for the agent *A* while *A* stands related with the act *a* that it is related with the object *O* as a means to it. This model, according to Kant, represents only natural ends like happiness etc., i.e. what men naturally desire and not a moral end which they ought to attain. The natural end is happiness. If a conscious act is always determined by the idea of happiness one cannot have an end which everyone should strive to attain. For, in that case, what one desires may not be desired by another person. The result is a subjective ethics with all its defects, the consequence of which ethics is a predominance

of personal opinions, chaos and rule of subjective principles which ultimately lead to an abolition of all morality. On the other hand, there are, according to Kant, universal laws of action the idea of which may also determine an act and it is only when the act is determined by the conception of such a law the act is morally good. The old model excludes this alternative since it represented end of actions as being always a desired end. But the universal law itself is not a desired end being devoid of any natural content. That is to say, that our acts may also be determined by pure practical reason, i.e. by a moral law.

Thus, by the use of the concepts of 'practical principle' and 'law' Kant claims to have been able to account for all actions that are admitted both by him and his predecessors to be rational (or conscious or voluntary) as well as genuine moral actions in the same model. The Kantian model may be represented in the following way. The end or the object *O* of volition may be of two categories, and may be related with the agent *A*, too, in two different ways. An object of one of these categories becomes the end for an agent in this way that whoever desires *O*, should do *a*. This is the case of a non-moral action. Whereas an object *O*, of the second category becomes an object or an end for an agent by not being an object of desire but by virtue of being a command. This is the case of a moral action. In both the cases the idea of the object determines the will of the agent, but differently in each case. In the first case, the *O* stands related with the agent as being an object of desire and then stands related with the act *a* which is a means to *O*. In the second case, the *O* stands related with the agent as being a law or a command that enjoins a particular act and that is to be obeyed. The mode of determination by the non-moral object is desire, while that by the moral law is reverence. But it must be remembered in this connection that the law or command be-

comes the object for an agent not because the agent reveres it. The law or the command itself by its binding force produces reverence in the mind of the agent that is sufficient to produce volition. This indicates that a genuinely moral action is not one which simply accords with the idea of a moral law but must be done out of reverence for the law, i.e. from the motive of duty. To take an example, a person may appear to act on the moral law that enjoins helping a man in distress, but he may do it from the motive of acquiring fame. In this case the agent has the idea of the law and he also acts accordingly. But his act cannot be said to be moral for the motive from which the act is done is non-moral. To be moral, the act must be done from the motive of duty.

So far we have mentioned only that rational acts are those which are done in accordance with the idea of laws or practical principles. These practical principles may be either universal or non-universal and when a person acts on a non-universal practical principle his reason is said to serve his inclination, etc. Practical principles which are non-universal are those that are not valid for every rational being but for only those who wish to attain the desired end and only when they do so. Such principles are also called material since they have essential reference to the *objects* desired. These become material maxims or subjective principles when they are actually adopted by persons. On the other hand, universal laws of actions are those which are to be adopted by all who are rational beings irrespective of the particular desires they may happen to have. These are called formal, since, roughly speaking, they determine the will by their form and not by their matter.

Kant's conception of material and formal principles needs a further clarification. It is often said that a material principle is one which is oriented towards an end constituting the matter of

the principle whereas a formal principle makes no such reference to an object which can constitute its matter. But let us try to be quite clear about the meaning of a formal practical principle.

Now, what a formal principle of action, as a general rule of behaviour, relates to is different from what a material principle does. A material principle of an act relates to the end which answers the question of why somebody has performed a certain act: the agent has performed the act because he desired a particular end. On the other hand, what a formal principle relates to is not such an end. So, the answer to the question why somebody has acted on a formal practical principle cannot be given in terms of such an end. What, then, would answer this question? It is the fact that the law is binding on the agent, i.e., the law enjoining a particular conduct. Thus, the 'why' in one case relates to the desired end, whereas in the other it relates to the enjoined act itself. The formal principle is, thus, formal in the sense that it is a command or an imperative which enjoins a particular act or demands an unconditional obedience to itself, whatever may be the desire and whatever may be the consequence. In this connection we may attend to some relevant points to avoid possible misunderstandings. In Kant's language, :

"A rational being cannot regard his maxims as practical universal laws, unless he conceives them as principles which determine the will, not by their matter, but by their form only. By the matter of a practical principle I mean the object of the will. This object is either the determining ground of the will or it is not... Now when we abstract from a law all matter, i.e., every object of the will (as a determining principle), nothing is left but the mere form of a universal legislation" ⁹

Thus, there are two things to be considered. First, the existence of the desired end or object of action and secondly, the role of that object in determining the will. There cannot be an objectless volition. This is what Kant says :

Now, it is indeed undeniable that every volition must have an object, and therefore a matter; but it does not follow that this is the determining principle, and the condition of the maxim; for, if it is so, then this cannot be exhibited in a universally legislative form, since in that case the expectation of the existence of the object would be the determining cause of the choice, and the volition must presuppose the dependence of the faculty of desire on the existence of something; but this dependence can only be sought in empirical conditions, and, therefore, can never furnish a foundation for a necessary and universal rule."¹⁰

So, the object must be there in some way or other. A material maxim is posterior to the desired object, i.e., the idea of the object determines the principle of action. Whoever desires a particular end like happiness would act on a principle like "I must acquire wealth if I seek happiness." On the other hand, a maxim is formal because it is prior to the object of volition in the sense that the object does not determine what would be the principle, rather it is the principle that determines the will and determines it directly, i.e., not by the object of desire but through reverence for the principle only. It is the law which says whether wealth should be the object of our volition.

Thus in an actual situation, i.e. when a person has a certain desire for an end like wealth, etc. the non-universal practical principles become necessitating for him and as such appear as imperatives. Since these principles command hypothetically to the effect, e.g., that "if anybody desires happiness he should

earn money", these are hypothetical imperatives. They are not necessitating for all, because wealth may not be desired by some people. So it exercises a non-moral necessitation according to Kant. On the other hand, a moral law is recognized as an imperative to an imperfect human being who has a natural tendency to act on desire, inclination etc.¹¹ It is categorical, having the general form like "I ought to do such and such" which represents an action as unconditionally necessary, i.e. apart from its relation to a further end or result.

The Kantian model of action shows that all actions that are done in accordance with the idea of law or principle are practical and all moral actions are rational. But all rational acts are not necessarily moral. For a morally good action some additional properties are required. If a person acts in accordance with his conception of moral law out of fear of punishment or because he finds pleasure in doing so, he cannot be said to have acted morally in the true sense of the term.¹² In order to have a genuine moral worth, the act must be done out of reverence for the law. Again, if a person acts in accordance with the idea of law which in fact is moral but he does not know it to be so or he knows it to be a law of God, then, according to Kant, he cannot be said to have acted morally in the true sense of the term. According to him, the consciousness that the law is a law of reason, of my own rational will, is necessary, and if he acts with such a consciousness and as such submits to his own real nature with a feeling of reverence for the law then and then only his action can have a genuine moral worth.

The way Kant has described practical principles and corresponding different types of voluntary or rational actions of human beings in his ethics indicates that practical principles are either non-universal or universal according to their having or not having a desired end as a natural content. They are either non-

moral (not morally good) or moral (morally good). The question that immediately arises is : is the division exclusive ? That is to say, whether or not a practical principle would always be either of the above two types, i.e. whether they will be either non-moral or moral. And we have seen that a non-moral practical principle is always with a content and is non-universal, while a moral principle is always without a content and universal. But can there be cross-divisions with the effect that there can be practical principles that are non-universal but without content ? And can there be practical principles that are universal but non-moral, i.e. without a moral import ? In other words, whether there are any such principles of action that are non-moral, non-universal but without content and whether there are universal or strictly rational but non-moral principles. Now, even if the Kantian notion of rational action becomes too narrow by excluding such cases (if there really are such cases) then also, for this reason, it would not logically follow that his moral theory is wrong. According to Kant's theory, there cannot be any principles of the first type and any action corresponding to them.

The principles that have natural content must be non-universal. Regarding the second point, i.e. whether there can be a non-moral but strictly rational principle of action for a human being the answer is also negative. For in order to become purely rational it should be without a content and to become non-moral it must fail to arouse reverence for the law. But there are certain acts performed by human beings which seem to result from the above two types of principles. Acts like moving a pen from this corner to that corner of the table during conversation, which are performed in the day-to-day life, obviously are not initiated by desire but they involve some non-universal law like stretching the hand and picking the thing in order to put it in another corner.

Still, these are cases which can neither be taken to be rational acts nor be taken as an irrational and so cannot be a product of a practical principle in the Kantian sense. So, how are these to be explained? Take another example. A person, while going to hire a taxi is suddenly asked by a beggar for a coin and he just opens his purse and gives him a coin. The incident takes a few seconds. There is no desire in the mind, no compassion, nor a clear consciousness of the rule or principle of helping the poor. We cannot take it just as a mechanical action, nor can we take it to be rational in Kant's sense, for we do not find any principle of desire determining it. It cannot be moral because the act is not determined by a clear consciousness of the law as a moral law of reason, i.e., as a law of his own will. The act only accords with a moral law. But we cannot call it either a mechanical act or a non-moral act. An attempt can be made to find out a determining principle by asking the agent why he did what he did. He may answer that he had a disposition to act on a moral principle and it is from this disposition that he performed the act. But still Kant's criterion that a moral act must be done out of reverence for the law is not fulfilled. So the act cannot be regarded as moral in the required sense. In other words, so long as the act is considered as being performed with no desire to give something to the man (independently of moral consideration) it falls within the first category of acts that are done on principle that are non-universal but without content. And in so far as the act is considered as being performed on a moral law and determined by no desire it falls within the second category of acts that follow from non-moral but strictly rational laws. But would Kant take such acts as rational ones? Or how would he account for the above two cases? If the act is considered as one which is done with no desire and without a consciousness of the law, we can, from the standpoint of Kant, regard it as a type of mechanical act that merely appears to be conscious. Now take

the act in the second sense. We have seen that if by a purely rational non-moral act we mean just an act that is done on a moral law without reverence for it and without a desire to do the same then the act fulfils the conditions of being strictly rational. But certainly Kant or anyone else would hesitate to take it to be strictly rational. How to deal with such embarrassing cases? A strictly rational act must be such that there is a conscious determination of the will by the law in question either through desire or through respect. But the present case lacks both. Still, so long as the characteristics are taken superficially the act appears to have a claim to be regarded as rational. And we do such acts in our everyday life. The possible answer from the side of Kant would be that these are more of a type of mechanical acts than of the rational. For here there is no conscious determination. These are habitual acts which had once at their very root some conscious efforts that gave them the rational character but lose that character when in course of time become habitual and can be performed without attention. These, in the words of G. F. Stout are "automatic".¹³ Again, somebody may hold that sometimes for doing such acts also men are held morally responsible if they lead to serious consequences like murder, etc. The answer would be that it is not the said act for which the agent is held morally blameworthy, but for the lack of attention or negligence on the part of the agent that leads to the said result. This shows that it is not possible for a human being to perform a strictly rational non-moral act, and that, there cannot be a volition for a human being with respect to such laws.

Now, we may point to certain other acts like doing sums or making mathematical derivations from axioms by rules, etc., and ask what will be the fate of such acts according to the Kantian criterion of rational acts? Obviously, there are certain principles

and some conscious physical movements corresponding to them. But the way of derivation does not fit in the model of practical principles. These principles neither seem to have a natural content nor have a moral import that can arouse reverence. Consequently Kant's criterion of being a rational act does not apply to such cases and certainly becomes too narrow. But what will be Kant's reading regarding such acts? I shall try to determine first of all whether such acts really have no natural content. Cases like this may be explained in the following manner. When a person engages himself in some mathematical derivations he is involved in some physical activities no doubt and such activities appear to have no motivating desire but follows certain rules of reason (and some physical behaviour accordingly). The whole situation looks like an act done from purely rational principles. So, one may conclude that there can be practical principles that are rational but without content. But if we closely observe the situation we shall find it to be a complex action involving some purely rational principles and also some principles that are not purely rational. It is rather a case of problem solving which is actually the act that is to be considered and that surely involves material practical principles.

Kantian scheme of practical principles shows that rational actions are either done on a principle of desire or on a principle of duty. The question now is regarding the classification of rational acts into moral, immoral and a-moral acts. The classification is to be made within the general class of rational actions as has been described previously. Granting that only a rational act can be treated as moral, a further three-fold distinction can be made among acts that are moral, immoral and a-moral. A moral rational act is one which is done on a moral law out of reverence for the law. An immoral rational act is one which is performed on a non-universal practical principle in violation to

the moral law. Whereas, a rational a-moral act is that which is not done on a moral law out of reverence for the law nor in violation of it but merely done on a principle of desire.

According to Kant, a human being is thus free to determine on what principle it will act by virtue of possessing a free will. Acts are morally good or bad not because they are accompanied by good desire or bad desire but because of the principle on which the agent chooses to act. Desires, inclinations etc. as such are neither good nor bad.¹⁴ It is principle of desire or duty the moral agent chooses which determines the moral worth of the act.

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NOTES

1. H. J. Paton, *Moral Law : Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*-Translated by H. J. Paton, p. 76, Edition 1972.

In the book *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* Thomas Kingsmill Abbott has translated the passage as :

"Everything in nature works according to laws. Rational beings alone have the faculty of acting according to the conception of laws, that is according to principles, i. e., have a will". - p. 29. 6th Edition.

2. H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative*, p. 82, Edition - 1953 "..... practical reason, with a maxim of subjective principles, is present in every kind of human action - even in action that we call impulsive-provided that it is consciously willed. This is what distinguishes human actions from animal behaviour, or again from what's called 'reflex actions', which we do not regard as our action at all".
3. Paton, *Moral Law* p. 84, Edition - 1972
"A maxim is a subjective principle of action and must be distinguished

from an objective principle—namely a practical law. The former contains a practical rule determined by reason in accordance with the conditions of the subject (often his ignorance or again his inclinations) : It is thus a principle on which the subject acts. A law, on the other hand, is an objective principle valid for every rational being, and it is a principle on which he ought to act that is an imperative”.

4. Lewis White Beck, *Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 38, Edition – 1960.

“Will is the faculty of acting according to a conception of law, which is not a product or discovery of understanding but of reason. In contrast, his predecessors had thought of will as only rational desire i. e., the faculty of acting according to a clear (rational) representation of the object of desire”.

5. Lewis White Beck, *Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 39

6. *Ibid*, p. 39.

7. *Ibid*.

8. Lewis White Beck, *Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 39.

9. *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*—Translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott. 6th Edition and other works on the Theory of Ethics, p. 114.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

11. H. J. Paton, *Moral Law*, p. 26, Edition – 1972.

“To imperfectly rational beings objective principles seem almost to constrain or (in Kant's technical language) to necessitate the will—that is, they seem to be imposed upon the will from without instead of being its necessary manifestation (as they would be in the case of a wholly rational agent).

12. *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and other Works*, Translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, p. 14, 6th Edition.

“.....there are many minds so sympathetically constituted that, without any other motive of vanity or self-interest, they find a pleasure in spreading joy around them, and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. But I maintain that is such a case an action of this kind, however proper, however amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth, but is on a level with other inclination e. g. the inclination to honour, which, if it is happily directed to that which is in fact of public utility and accordant with duty, and conse-

quently honourable, deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem. For the maxim lacks the moral import, namely that such actions be done from duty, not from inclination”.

- 13 G. F. Stout, *A Manual of Psychology*, p. 224, 5th Edition : and p. 227...
.....“ the formation of habit is an example of facilitation. The disposition left behind by previous condition facilitates subsequent conation in the attainment of its end. When this process of facilitation reaches a point at which conscious behaviour is no longer necessary, the action becomes automatic”.
14. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Translated by Theodore M. Greene and Hyot H. Hudson. Edition - 1960, p. 17. “..... the source of evil cannot lie in an object determining the will through inclination, nor yet in a natural impulse, can be only in a rule made by the will for the use of its freedom. That is in a maxim”.