

## IS KANT A METAETHICAL FORMALIST?

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This paper attempts to examine Kant's position as a metaethical formalist. In doing so, I compare his view with that of R. M. Hare.<sup>1</sup> In *The Language of Morals* Hare discusses his concept of universalizability. This concept of universalizability, some claim, is a kind of Kantianism. I propose that in many ways this claim is not true and that Kant is not a metaethical formalist.

In *The Language of Morals* and *Freedom and Reason* Hare attempts to discover those conditions which are necessary and sufficient for calling a judgment "moral". He seeks an analysis that will account for the fact that morality is a rational endeavour.<sup>2</sup>

Hare's position as a metaethical formalist will be clear from the following formulations:

- (i) (X) (X is a moral judgment if and only if (a) X is prescriptive and (b) the agent is willing to universalize X)<sup>3</sup>
- (ii) "X is prescriptive" means "X is an imperative or X entails an imperative",<sup>4</sup>
- (iii) "To universalize X" means "to accept that X holds for everyone, even the agent, in similar circumstances",<sup>5</sup>

This characterization is formalistic because it characterizes morality without at any time making reference to the content of moral judgments. Whether or not a judgment is moral depends solely on logical or quasi-logical<sup>6</sup> properties of the judgment - namely, whether or not it is prescriptive and universalizable. Any judgment, whatever its content, whatever it in fact prescribes, is moral if it meets these two conditions. An example will serve to make this more clear. Suppose someone (a Nazi perhaps)<sup>7</sup> were to offer the following as a moral

judgment:” One ought to exterminate as many Jews as possible”. Can such a judgement form a part of a moral system? According to Hare, it can if two conditions are met. First, the person offering the judgment must actually be recommending it to us as a course of action and not, for example, merely be making a sociological generalization that, as a matter of fact, people of a certain sort believe that one ought to exterminate the Jews. This is the condition of prescriptivity. Second, the person offering the judgment must be willing to accept that the judgment applies to everyone meeting the conditions specified within the judgment. If for example, it were discovered that members of the Nazi’s family were Jewish or that even he himself had Jewish ancestry, he would admit that he and his family ought to be exterminated. This is the condition of universalizability. These conditions are formal because they never demand that the issue he raised of whether or not the action contemplated has consequences which are desirable in terms of some value.

Now Hare’s terminology certainly has a Kantian flavor to it. However, the actual content of his theory is in many ways quite opposed to Kant’s view. Kant, it will be remembered, offered the following characterization of morality:

- (i) (X) (X is a system of rational morality if and only if the maxims of the actions prescribed in X are universalizable)
- (ii) “X is universalizable” means “General action on the basis of X would leave secure the freedom of every rational being”<sup>8</sup>

I think that Kant and Hare would both agree that moral judgments are prescriptive. To say that one morally ought to do so and so, according to Kant, is to offer an imperative for moral action to a finitely rational being. The impossibility of meaningfully offering imperatives of morality to fully rational beings is Kant’s reason for claiming that it is absurd to say, for example, that God ought to do so and so. The crucial issue however, is universalizability. And it is here that Kant and Hare are in fundamental disagreement.

For Hare, the universalizability of a judgment depends solely upon what the agent is willing to accept. He is not claiming that a universalizable moral judgment is one which in fact could be a universal law nor one which merely satisfies the condition that the agent could, without contradiction, will it be a universal law. Rather it is one which the agent does will to accept as a universal

practice. No matter how evil or even unworkable the state of affairs, if the agent is willing that he and everyone else labor under it, then his judgment is moral. The universalizability of a judgment, then, is not determined by any objective state of affairs in the agent's environment, but only by what the agent is or is not willing to put up with. If he is willing to be exterminated if it is discovered that he is a Jew, then his prescriptive judgment "one ought to exterminate as many Jews as possible" is a moral judgment. Morality, on this view, thus becomes essentially a private rather than a public enterprise. As Hart remarks :

To characterise morality ... as *primarily* a matter of the application to conduct of those ultimate principles which the individual accepts or to which he commits himself for the conduct of his life seems to me an excessively Protestant approach. Important as this aspect or kind of moral judgment is, we need to understand it as a development from the primary phenomenon of the morality of a social group.<sup>9</sup>

Kant agrees with Hare that the agent ought to give himself a privileged status in morality. This is the reason that the maxim of the action is evaluated and not the action itself. The issue at stake is not simply "Should I, pay Jones \$50 that I owe him at 5 o'clock? but rather the following: Is the general principle of not paying a debt moral or immoral?" I leave my own personal needs and idiosyncracies out of the picture and consider merely the *type* of action I am contemplating. This removes personal bias and is an important part of morality. But though Kant agrees with Hare that personal bias has no place in morality, his agreement is simply a consequence of his general theory - namely, that each rational agent has the same value and that action ought to be controlled accordingly.

On Kant's view, the statement "X is universalizable" is not just a statement about what the agent is willing to accept. Rather it is a statement about the consequences of X as a general performance. If X, as a general performance, would interfere with the freedom of rational beings, then X can form a part of no system of rational morality. And thus the judgment "one ought to exterminate the Jews" could not, even if the agent is willing to universalize it, be a part of a rational morality. For as a general practice it would violate the right of freedom in rational beings. Even if we are willing to see such action made a universal practice, it still is not in fact universalizable. For it would have consequences inconsistent with the demands of rational morality.

Thus I see no reason for regarding Hare's view as a kind of Kantianism. Though agreeing that moral judgments are prescriptive (at least for finitely rational beings), their doctrines of universalizability are radically opposed. Kant's theory, claiming that the value of freedom in each rational being is a limiting condition on the morality of actions, is thus teleological and not formalistic. For it argues that, to be engaged in a morality, an agent must do the following : (i) ascertain the general principle or maxim of his action; (ii) determine whether or not this maxim could exist (not merely whether or not he would be willing to put up with it) as a universal law preserving the freedom of all rational beings.

### NOTES

1. William Frankena portrays Kant as a formalist in his "Some Recent Conceptions of Morality" and in "Morality and the Language of Conduct". Frankena contrasts formalists in ethics (like Hare) with non-formalists (like Hart). He says nothing about Kant. But it is interesting that those he classifies as formalists are philosophers whose ethical theories are thought to bear a close resemblance to Kant's own views. See also "Freedom and Reason", p. 34; and Richard Brandt's "Ethical Theory", pp.221.ff.
2. See, *The Language of Morals*, p. 178; and "Freedom and Reason", p. 8.
3. *Ibid.* pp. 175-179.
4. *Ibid.* pp. 163-179.
5. "Freedom and Reason", p.30-31.
6. I say quasi-logical because the principle of universalizability is spelled out in terms of what the agent is willing to accept.
7. See Hare's own example in "Freedom and Reason", Chapters 9 and 11.
8. See Beck's translation of Kant's "Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals", 39, 47, and 57.
9. Hart, *Essays and Moral Obligations* p. 100.

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