

## THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE : ITS EPISTEMOLOGICAL STATUS

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In his *Groundwork of The Metaphysic of Morals* (1785), Kant's problem is to find out a supreme principle of morality. In this paper I wish to demonstrate that the categorical imperative is not only the supreme principle of morality as laid down in the *Groundwork* but is at the same time a substantive principle.

Kant distinguishes between a maxim and a principle because of their central importance in his moral philosophy. A principle can be looked at from two different view points; subjective and objective. The subjective principle designates a maxim or a personal rule. A maxim may be understood as that which consists of an agent's reason for wanting to perform an action. This characterisation allows at least two alternative perspectives to look afresh at a maxim :

- (i) as a subjective principle of volition or action
- (ii) as a personal rule or scale of measurement adopted by an individual in a concrete problem situation.

Maxims can further be divided into material and formal. *Material maxims* generalise a particular action with its particular motive. For example, an individual need be concerned only with his own pleasures in life without caring for the well being of others. Such a maxim is a material one as the end determines the maxim one adopts. The maxim is subject to the circumstances. As against this are the formal maxims.

*Formal maxims* are not concerned with gratification of particular desires. A formal maxim enjoins doing one's duty whatever that duty may be. It is such formal maxims, which give moral worth to an action. Only formal maxims generate morally worthy actions as they are not subject to the circumstances. All human

beings in Kant's view are capable of formulating acting upon formal maxims.

In a contrast with the maxim, there are objective principles which can be understood as laws. "Objective" here implies a formal, universal aspect of a rule, which enables it to be applicable to all individuals irrespective of their contingent claims. Objective principles are those on which a rational agent acts when reason has full control over his actions. To a finite rational agent objective principle appears as a command or an imperative. While an infinite or a holy rational agent does not regard objective principles as imperatives or commands because they flow necessarily from his nature.

In any discussion on Kant's concepts of imperatives it is usual to clarify the difference between necessary and necessitation. Moreover this clarification also distinguishes the concept of a finite rational agent from that of an infinite rational agent. Rationality is in Kant's ethical thought a core defining feature of the finite agent. This rationality sets him apart from other organic beings. However in the case of a finite rational agent the rationality comes combined with desires. As a result of which the rational agent may not act in accordance with reason. It is this inclination which makes the moral objective principles appear as commands and therefore necessitated. The actions that are objectively necessary therefore appear as commands or dictates which ought to be complied with. Imperatives are interpreted as commands by the finite rational agent.

A will which is good through and through recognises the moral law as a natural law to be followed. Hence such a will requires no necessitation. In such a being reason determines the will so that the actions that are objectively necessary are at the same time subjectively necessary. Such a being (God) has the power to act on those imperatives which reason independently of inclination recognises to be necessary. All the actions of such a being are in conformity with the categorical imperative and they automatically flow from his nature. "Hence for the divine will, and in general for a holy will, there are no imperatives: 'I ought' is here out of place, because 'I will' is already of itself necessary in harmony with the law."<sup>1</sup>

Imperatives may command hypothetically or categorically. If the action prescribed in the imperative is good as a means to achieving particular end then it is a hypothetical imperative. For example, I must study to do well in the

examination. Thus a hypothetical imperative classifies an action according to the result it leads to possible or actual.

A *categorical* imperative on the other hand is unconditional; the action it prescribes is not a means to achieving any particular end. A categorical imperative represents an action as objectively necessary, necessary in itself. The command expressed by a categorical imperative is of the form 'One ought not to lie'. "All imperatives are expressed by an 'ought' (Sollen)."<sup>2</sup> What makes a proposition a categorical imperative? Kant explains: "A categorical imperative would be one which represented an action as objectively necessary in itself apart from its relation to a further end."<sup>3</sup> In Kant's terminology a categorical imperative takes the form, "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."<sup>4</sup> At this point I will elucidate a few aspects of the categorical imperative which highlight certain features of the supreme principle of morality and go a long way in establishing its substantive status.

- 1) Kant is here concerned with finding an imperative of morality. His aim is to establish a supreme principle of morality, but he is not focusing on the application of this principle to actual cases. He gives a few illustrations in order to explain the supreme principle of morality.
- 2) The principle is objective, in the sense that its objectivity is independent of any empirical assumptions. Empirical examples or illustrations of actual human experiences are incapable of generating objective moral laws. These illustrations can best serve as models and highlight the practicability of what these contingent laws demand. "What is more, we cannot do morality a worst service than by seeking to derive it from examples. Every example of it presented to me must first be judged by moral principles in order to decide if it is fit to serve as an original example- that is, as a model: it can in no way supply the prime source for the concept of morality."<sup>5</sup>
- 3) The categorical imperative furthermore is neither a God given principle of morality nor is it totally derivable from human experience. It is a synthetic a priori principle. It is synthetic as it applies to the concept of rational being both finite and infinite. Moreover it is derived only from the reasoning capacity of a rational being independent of his inclinations. The rational

being is not only the lawmaker but also subject to it at the same time. He prescribes laws to himself as he realises that to be universal and unconditional a law must apply to all rational beings irrespective of their circumstance. This is possible only when we derive the law out of our own reason *a priori*. This fact however does not imply that Kant did not value actions done out of sympathy and generosity. "We shall thus have to investigate the possibility of a categorical imperative entirely *a priori*, since here we do not enjoy the advantage of having its reality given in experience and so of being obliged merely to explain, and not to establish its possibility ..... So much, however, can be seen provisionally- that the categorical imperative alone purports to be a practical law, while all rest may be called principle of the will but not laws."<sup>6</sup>

- 4) In claiming that the categorical imperative is synthetic *a priori*, Kant is explaining the peculiarities of the categorical imperative. In an analytic proposition the predicate is contained in the subject and can be understood by analysis of the subject term. In the case of a synthetic proposition the predicate is not contained in the subject term but can be justified by reference to a third term which is outside the purview of the subject term. In the case of a categorical imperative no such justification is possible because the imperative is expressed as 'I ought to do my duty.' Here the rational agent's reasons for acting are not bound up with conditions which could be explained by reference to examples; rather it involves a necessity which is based on the rationality of the agent.
- 5) Hence a categorical imperative is a synthetic *a priori* proposition. If reason is to determine the conduct then it must do so completely *a priori*. "It is here that she (philosophy) has to show her purity as the authoress of her own laws-not as the mouthpiece of laws whispered to her by some implanted sense or by who knows what tuterally nature, all of which laws together, though they may always be better than nothing, can never furnish us with principles dictated by reason. These principles must have an origin entirely and completely *a priori* and must at the same time derive from their sovereign authority."<sup>7</sup> Kant does not justify the categorical imperative

deductively as the facts are not present in a syllogistic form, nor is it possible to reach the categorical imperative inductively by generalisation. It is determined completely *a priori* "since we do not enjoy the advantage of having its reality given in experience."<sup>8</sup> Thus it is not possible to derive from the domain of human experience an objective moral law, which is both universal and unconditional. The categorical imperative contains only the necessity in that our maxims conform to this supreme principle of morality. Thus the moral law springs from man's own rationality. But this rationality must come combined with the autonomy of the will.

A finite rational being can frame laws only when his will is regarded as autonomous. Kant explains that the autonomy of the will is to be presupposed. Moreover the concept of autonomy cannot be demonstrated as reason cannot be its own author without this concept. Thus a finite rational being is not only the author of the moral law but also subject to it. It is his rationality which gives the capability of universalising subjective maxims into objective laws.

To show the necessity of the moral law and its applicability to a finite rational being, Kant referred to the two well-known standpoints of *phenomena* and *noumena*. These need not be considered as two different words constituting two different spatio-temporal orders; rather they are used by Kant as two standpoints to demonstrate the necessity of categorical imperative. Reason and inclinations together constitute the mental make-up of the finite rational being. Given this when a finite rational being acts in accordance with reason his will is guided by reason alone (noumena). But when his will is determined by the laws of nature then his will is subject to contingencies (phenomena). In the former case the 'I ought' becomes 'I will' and in the latter case the force of the command remains operative. Kant does not notice the fact that we cannot regard a finite rational being from two standpoints. Instead of positing these two standpoints, Kant could have regarded freedom and autonomy as inherent to the constitution of a finite rational being who recognises the command of reason but may fail at times to obey the command. Kant's greatest contribution lies in the fact that he kept the moral law free from the contingencies of human nature and gave supreme importance to the reasoning capabilities of a finite rational being. It is this reason

which gives man the capacity to frame moral laws not only for his own self but also to universalise them through his maxims. Reciprocity is built in the concept of a supreme moral law. I therefore feel that the charge against the categorical imperative as being merely formal becomes meaningless if one were to reflect a little on the concept of reciprocity. No maxim is capable of getting universalised unless all rational agents are able to act upon it in an impartial manner. Moreover a law does not remain a law if it is partial to some rational agents. Therefore in order to have a categorical imperative or the supreme principle of morality there ought to be the condition of universality and necessity. Thus a maxim remains a maxim unless the individual's action satisfies these conditions. A law which is categorical imperative cannot be an objective law unless it is framed in keeping with reason independent of contingent circumstances.

Let me elucidate a very pertinent point made by Kant with regard to the categorical imperative. He writes : "There is only a single categorical imperative and it is this. 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.' Now if all imperatives of duty can be derived from this one imperative as their principle, then even although we leave it unsettled whether what we call duty may not be an empty concept, we shall still be able to show at least what we understand by it and what the concept means."<sup>9</sup>

This statement is important. It goes to substantiate Kant's claim that the categorical imperative contains only the necessity that maxims be universal. Only that action which fulfills the criterion of universalisability and necessity qualifies to be a dutiful action. Thus all the three formulations:

- a) Maxims be universal in their nature.
- b) Never to treat man simply as a means but also as an end.
- c) All men together constitute a kingdom of ends;

are nothing but different formulations of the same law. These three formulations endorse the fact that the supreme principle of morality is valid for all rational beings, as it is an expression of the will of a rational being. All the three formulations specify different features of the moral law. They are different ways of representing the basic formulation of the categorical imperative. All the three formulations have :

- 1) Form- that is their capacity to become universal.
- 2) Matter- they set objective ends as opposed to relative ends.
- 3) Combination of the form and matter- categorical imperative is an ideal, which is capable of realisation. A pursuit of this supreme principle of morality alone gives man his dignity.

The prescription Kant gives for morality is necessity and universality. Any practical law of morality must incorporate these two elements. I take example of false promise to illustrate the two conditions of universality and necessity. If the maxim of making a false promise is made into a principle of morality then it is apparent that it is incapable of universalisation for three reasons:

- 1) The meaning of promise making is lost and the principle will be to lie when it suits one's circumstances.
- 2) If everyone made false promises then the meaning of a true promise will be lost and no one will know and understand the meaning of promises anymore.
- 3) The man who is making a false promise is simply cheating the other person as a means to achieve his purpose. The person is not concerned with fulfilling his part of the promise. He is using the other person simply as a means to suit his ends. Thus a person who makes a false promise violates the principle of treating every rational being as an end and not merely as means.

To reject the charge of formalism, I reformulate the three formulations of the categorical imperative to show that it is a substantive principle of morality. 'So act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law treating humanity never as a relative end meant for fulfilling contingent ends of man, but always as an end, because all rational beings finite or infinite, together form a kingdom of ends or a commonwealth.' This reformulation immediately highlights the core features of Kant's ethical thought which are central to his categorical imperative. The features are: rationality, freedom and the end in itself.

The epistemological status of the categorical imperative is that it is a synthetic *a priori* proposition. It is synthetic as it is substantive; not formal, and it applies to the finite rational agent. It is *a priori*, for it is a product of the finite

reationality. Moreover this one principle lays the foundation for objective principles. All objective principles must respect the rationality, freedom and dignity of the finite agent. If the laws violate the basic human dignity then they cannot be objective principles.

C.D. Broad highlighted the point that "Kant has been blamed because no particular rules of conduct can be deduced from his general principle. It is said to be "empty", "sterile", and "merely formal". Since Kant was well aware that his general principle is merely formal, since he plainly regarded this as its merit, we may assume that this objection rests on a misunderstanding."<sup>10</sup>

Kant's greatest merit lies in that he kept morals free from conditions. No condition, be it that of conscience, happiness, utility or what you will can supply us with necessity. Kant's formulation of the categorical imperative is not formal as it is a product of man's own reasoning and when he applies it to himself he regards it as an imperative of duty which is to be obeyed. The categorical imperative will be an empty principle if it were merely analytic, a tautology. But it is both synthetic and *a priori*. Kant's categorical imperative is in fact substantive because all other formulations can be understood in terms of this one principle.

### NOTES

1. *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, in Paton's ed. *The Moral Law*, B.I. Publications, New Delhi, 1979, Indian Edition, p.78
2. *Ibid*, p. 77
3. *Ibid*, p. 78
4. *Ibid*, p. 84
5. *Ibid*, p. 73
6. *Ibid*, p. 83
7. *Ibid*, p. 88



8. *Ibid*, p. 83
9. *Ibid*, p. 84
10. Board, C.D., *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. 1930, London, p.122

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