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## Topic 2 (Kant)

For philosophical work, the quotation, which compares a serious philosophical notion (moral law) with an almost romantic aspect of a natural phenomena (starry sky) might sound rather strange. Especially so, if we consider that it belongs to Kant and that what he concludes his famous ethical theory, which is often seen as having somewhat cold, austere, non-emotional character. The quotation, above all shows the author's almost enthusiastic attitude towards the main object of his theory: the moral law he claims to have found in himself.

The quotation has the function of comparison. The admiration of night sky, covered with stars occurs quite often; I am sure most of the people have experienced this beauty. On the other hand, the admiration of our inner moral laws that supposedly govern our decisions doesn't seem to be very common. But Kant assures us that, if properly understood this moral law (as he claims he does), we would encounter the very same beauty as previously while looking into the sky.

We can make some further inferences from this supposed analogousness of sky and moral law. One of the characteristics of the former is, that it appears more or less the same, regardless of who is observing it, from where he is observing and when he is observing. (I admit, this is not completely true; it matters very much on which hemisphere one stands. But, for the sake of metaphors, let us neglect this inconvenience.) The sky symbolises unchangeability, objectivity, absoluteness. According to Kant, the same absoluteness can be found in our moral law.

But this absoluteness of moral law is not obvious. Kant had to create a whole new ethical theory to justify his position. This is actually the main driving force behind Kant's ethical theory. He was convinced that ethics must be absolute. If ethics are supposed to answer man's question: 'what should I do', then the answer has to be clear and valid for whoever is asking. In this position his theory is similar to many earlier ethical theories, such as Plato's or Christian ethics. However, there is one important distinction Kant made. These earlier absolutist ethics all laid the foundations of their teachings in some other, some remote, ideal world (world of ideas for Plato, God/heaven for Christianity). This other world is in every regard better than our physical world; according to these ethical theories our lives, if truly ethical, should be a constant motion towards this ideal world. Kant, however, intended to build human ethics from the foundation of human nature itself.

To do that, he must first answer the question 'what is human? what is human essence?'. He answers, like Aristotle did before him, that human essence is human reason. In possessing a mind, ability to think, to logically deduct and conclude, man differs from animals. It is therefore here where we should be searching for the sources of our moral laws. We also gain additional advantage if we base the moral laws on reason. Let's compare it to theory which claims that ethics are based on emotions (such was, for example, the ethical side of philosophy of David Hume). It is obvious, that emotions towards some particular object or action differ greatly among different people. If we would try to base moral law on emotion, we would expose ourselves fully to the moral relativism; there would be no universal, objective way of morally evaluating different deeds, since we would have only our feelings to rely on. Reason, on the other hand, appears common to the whole humankind. It appears that for every one of us his mind functions in almost the same way. Mathematical principles, for example, are equally understandable for every one. And this is basically what Kant desires of ethical theory: to possess the same clarity and resistance to doubt that mathematics and other natural sciences do. A particular moral law should, if given some thought, appear as evident and obvious as a mathematical formula.

Of course, an empty reason cannot provide moral laws by itself. First a criterion needs to be created with which we can judge the actions as right or wrong. Kant's intention is to constitute an objective and universally valid moral system. Whether an action is right or wrong should not depend on a particular situation in which it is committed. Therefore a way to check the general righteousness of an action is to

consider it isolated from this particular situation. As Kant has put it: 'the action can only be considered to be right if its general maxim can be regarded as moral rule without contradiction'. As an example Kant considers the action of lying. Lying is wrong, because a rule 'you must lie' contradicts itself. Similar conclusions can be made for all of what I call 'negative actions'. Negative actions are actions that are in essence the denial of some other notion that precedes it. Lie is denial of truth, murder is denial of life, theft is denial of property. Since these negative actions are essentially a denial, they cannot exist without the notion they deny. But if we tried to elevate these negative actions to the level of universal rule, that would completely erase the notion they are based on (if everyone lied, there would be no truth). And since negative actions are nothing without the notion they deny, they too would lose meaning. If we again consider the problem of lying: If everyone lied, there would be no truth. But if there is no truth, how can we say that something is a lie? It is apparent, that these negative actions can never be considered absolute rule, and are therefore always wrong.

This is very convenient for Kant. Negative actions are a denial, and denial is a form of destruction. Negative actions have therefore always borne at least some connotation of immorality. This secures to Kant's ethical theory that it will remain in agreement with most of commonly accepted ethics; its conclusions won't differ too greatly. That probably accounts for much of the success of Kant's theory – he did not so much invent a new morality, as he did justify the existing one.

This was a short description of Kant's ethical theory and its main characteristics. In the second part of the essay, however, I will try to express and explain my criticism of different points of Kant's theory. I will proceed from 'top to bottom', starting with the Kant's final conclusion and then putting to question also his prepositions and inferences.

Upon detailed inspection, Kant's principle of universalisation begins to show some difficulties. The least of those are the discrepancies that appear (despite general similarity) between it and the generally accepted ethics, captured in the well known 'murderer' example: If a man with obvious murderous intentions would approach you, asking about the location of his next victim, you would have to tell the truth - according to Kant, you always have to tell it. This austerity of Kant's theory has been the cause of much reproaching; but it cannot yet be the cause to refute it.

'The action can only be considered to be right if its general maxim can be regarded as moral rule without contradiction'. The real problem in my opinion is, that Kant has not well explained what 'the maxim' of a particular situation is. It appears he has taken it as obvious, but it is not so. In the 'murderer' case, we could choose to lie, following the maxim 'do not help to kill other people' (this maxim can be considered as a moral rule). Therefore, applying Kant's principle to same situation in two different forms brings us to different conclusions – Kant's ethical theory can contradict itself.

The second problematic point of Kant's theory is in my opinion his justification of reason being foundation of morality. Kant's ethical theory was, among other things, a reaction against scepticism and relativism of David Hume. Nevertheless, it was still not completely resistant to Hume's famous objection against absolute moral rule. Hume said: 'No 'There is' includes 'You should''. He meant that inferring from some particular ontology to some particular ethics is not a valid logical action. Hume noticed that ethical philosophers start with describing the world, and then at once start instructing us how should we act. Hume denied that any relevant connection between these two things exists. His doubt can be applied to Kant as well. Kant states that human, unlike animal, possesses reason. Then he states that human should act as his reason tells him to. This does not sound wrong, it sounds even plausible – but the conclusion doesn't necessarily follow from the premise. If we ask: 'why should man act reasonably?' then the question 'because he (and only he) possesses reason.' is not completely satisfying (similar could then be argued for emotions). It lacks the logical doubtlessness that Kant strived for.

My last critique of Kant is critique of his fundamental premise – that the essence of man is reason. Again we can say that this appears plausible but not necessary: the prevalence of reason in man's life can easily be attributed to, for example, the influence of surroundings and of culture. In contrast to Kant's position I will here state the position of existentialists, particularly French philosopher J.P. Sartre. Sartre simply denies that any essence can be attributed to human. According to Sartre, for every object except human, essence is more important than existence – essence precedes existence. To say, for example, that a certain table exists, would be meaningless unless we already possessed some idea of what table is. This isn't so, however, in the case of human. A human encounters himself without any pre-given idea about what he is. Nothing definite can be said about human as such - any essence can only

be attributed to him (by himself or by others) later through his life – his existence precedes his essence. Or, how Sartre had aptly put it: ‘A man is not, what he is and is, what he is not.’

Such position obviously yields completely different conclusions than Kant’s theory does. Sartre actually retains Kant’s conviction that answer to ‘What is right thing to do?’ is inseparably connected with answer to question ‘What is human? (=what is his essence?)’. But if nothing definite can be said about human, nothing definite can be said about the rightness of his actions either. So Sartre develops his theory, that man is completely free, unrestrained by any laws (moral or other). But surprisingly, he once again revives the Kant’s ideas of necessary universality of actions. For Sartre a man is radically free, but also radically responsible. He is responsible not just for himself, but for all human kind, as his every action matters in creating some general concept of humanity. Therefore, a man must have the whole humanity in mind for every action he performs

Despite all the problems that I mentioned, Kant’s ethical theory is a truly magnificent and remarkable effort to justify absolute moral laws. It had to face the problems of every absolutist theory, and (in my opinion) failed on some of them, but it still possesses great importance. If nothing else, we have seen in case of Sartre that Kant’s ideas are relevant and possible, even without absolute moral laws.