

Topic 2 (Kant)

Introduction

The above mentioned quotation is the ultimate brick of the building called Kant's ethics, which is thought to be the paradigm of deontology. In other words, it represents the starting point and certain frame for every ethics based on the notion of duty. I consider complete Kant's system to be coherent and it is my aim to identify the values of the ethics which he constructed in the *Critique of practical reason* (*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*), compare it with hedonistic-utilitarian and eudaimonistic, and to determine its modernity and contemporaneity.

I

Firstly, let us elaborate the "starry sky above me and the moral law within me". Kant did not intend to look for either of them outside his own sight. He saw them in front of himself and connected them with the consciousness of his existence. When pointing our look to the countless plenty of stars, we must become aware of our total unimportance as animals. On the contrary, the other sight infinitely raises our value as intelligence, as personality, in which moral law announces life, conducted by reason and independent from animality.

Kant utters two notions to depict human being: a phenomenon and a noumenon. Man is a phenomenon due to living in heteronomy – as an animal acting on desires not legislated by reason, but by natural laws. At the same time, man is a noumenon (Ding an sich) thing as it is in itself. We have to postulate human being as a noumenon in order to allow the existence of our free will, which gives us autonomy.

Therefore, man's freedom consists of two components: 1) independence from natural determinism (negative determination of freedom) and 2) possibility of determination by his own reasonable principles (positive determination of freedom).

Certain paradoxality of Kant's notion of freedom emerges at this point. Actually, his understanding of freedom differs very from the laic one. One might think of freedom as "being free from everything" i.e. "to have no obligations to anything". And just on the contrary, Kant finds freedom to be voluntarily subordinating ourselves to the moral law, prescribed by our own reason, what I very much agree.

II

Secondly, in Kant's philosophy, *freedom* is crucial for understanding morality. Considering the question of freedom, there were numerous significant contributions.

In his theodicea, Leibniz considered this world to be the best of all possible worlds. Since the aim of the theodicea was to justify the existence of evil in the world, Leibniz pursued to solve the puzzle this way: God could make the world better, but would limit human freedom, so this world is the best of all worlds: when making it, God reduced its perfectness in order to

allow more human freedom. This was to become a matter of Voltaire's critique in his *Candid*. But, Schopenhauer did not agree and considered this world to be the worst of all worlds, because it produces only pain and suffering for human beings.

Complete Hegel's philosophy of history is based on the concept that the history of the world represents progress in the consciousness of freedom. We come to Sartre and his existentialist understanding of freedom: He actually broadens the notion of freedom, according to him it is every intentional activity, which can also be conditioned by outside factors. He also broadens the notion of free choice to every reflective taking of an attitude, and consequently considers human responsibility to be absolute because of the possibility to choose.

III

Thirdly, when referring to Kant's idea of autonomy that humans have as noumena, we should emphasise also the role of autonomy in the wider context of Kant's system. He depicts autonomy as the crucial idea for the self-understanding of European modernity. Autonomy is implicitly contained in his definition of Enlightenment: "Enlightenment is man's leaving his self-caused immaturity". He utters the term immaturity to depict the impossibility of using our own reason without *outside guidance*. And this immaturity is self-caused, actually self-blamed, because it is not caused by the lack of reason, but by the lack of decision and courage to use the reason without being led by another. That's the motto of Enlightenment: "***Sapere aude***" – have courage to use your reason freely, and that represents Kant's universal call for *emancipation* – what appropriately illustrates modernity of his philosophy – his contribution to forming modern men/women.

And the importance of autonomy is decisive for reasonable moral legislation. Kant pursued to find sure criteria for moral acting, and looked for their source in a formal and a priori element. That element is the moral law, which is *autonomously* legislated by reason itself.

In its theoretical application, reason gets stuck in an antinomy considering freedom and causality. That is where the practical reason, as the prescriber of the moral law expresses its supremacy – it provides *practical norms* for acting in real life. This particular point – the supremacy of the practical over the theoretical reason was used by Fichte to found his own philosophy.

IV

Fourthly, Kant criticises "content determined" (hedonistic-eudaimonistic and utilitarian) ethics. These ethics pursue to determine the morality of an act according to its effect. If it contributes to happiness, joy, public or personal benefit, then the action is moral. Kant strongly opposes this attitude because we can only know what leads to happiness of a particular person in a particular situation from experience, and not a priori. That implicates the impossibility of constructing an a priori moral law according to hedonistic-eudaimonistic and utilitarian principles. Furthermore, I must underline that people differ very much in their understanding of happiness, what contributes to the thesis that "content determined" ethics are not appropriate for making an a priori moral law.

And, how shall we actually define the moral law? Well, I do not have to know what happiness means for every particular person, but I shall surely act morally if my maxim (personal principle) can become a universal value. That's how Kant solves the puzzle of defining the moral law without falling into content determined ethics. He imposes only the form of the law and not its content, leaving enough space for personal autonomy. That is the essence of the

first formulation of his categorical imperative: “Act always on that maxim which you can want to become universal law”

Thus, the morality of an action can be determined when we filter it through the categorical imperative. I shall use his exemplification in order to solidify this point. If someone gives me a deposit without making a written evidence of this transaction, and dies is it moral not to return this deposit? Let us filter it through the categorical imperative: can I want everyone to stop returning deposits? No, because that would implicate there were no deposits at all. Similar conclusion can be made considering giving promises in a situation I know I cannot fulfil it.

Now, I would like to compare the categorical imperative with the golden rule (“Do unto others as you would want the others to do unto you”). These two principles have certain common features, like consistency, but contain also significant differences. While the golden rule is marked by mutuality and reciprocity, the characteristic of the categorical imperative is universalisability. But, even more important, golden rule is a “material principle” and does not secure from moral relativism. Its final implication could be justifying immoral and criminal acts, that’s why I emphasise the supremacy of the categorical imperative.

Motive for acting according to the categorical imperative must be *duty*, and duty is the necessity of acting out of respecting of the law. That is where complete Kant’s ethics derives its name from - it is deontological, the ethics of duty. Furthermore, Kant considers *only* the acts motivated by duty towards the categorical imperative to be moral. If the effects of an act are objectively good, but it was not motivated by the duty toward the categorical imperative, the act is only according to legality and not the morality. The formal determination of the moral law was called formalism by Kant’s critics, foremost Hegel, and excluding other motives than duty from the field of morality was defined as rigorism by Schiller and other critics.

V

Fifthly, The notion of human dignity is closely related to the moral law. For that reason, Kant imposed the second formulation of the categorical imperative: “Act so that you treat humanity in your personality and the personality of the others always as an end and never only as means” This formulation reflects his humanistic attitude – human being must never be simple instruments, but humanity in themselves must be an aim. We should notice the slight difference between *only as means* and *means*. The conclusion is that humans *can sometimes* be used as means, and this was the matter of the later socialist critique. But, Kant emphasises that humans can be used as means only if they agree. This point undoubtedly disqualifies slavery, trafficking and other forms of abuse of human beings.

In my opinion, in everyday life, although we are often unaware of that fact, we expect others to treat us according to the categorical imperative, and when it is upon us to fulfil the task of respecting it, we occasionally fail. Kant was aware of the fact that categorical imperative cannot be absolutely fulfilled by ordinary humans. That would rather be a characteristic of a saint (sacred) will. In the case of saint (sacred) will, favour and duty are identical so the person with such will expresses a favour towards to the duty of acting according to the moral law. Nevertheless, there is a possibility of infinite progress in respecting the moral law.

The fact of disrespecting categorical imperative in everyday life was used by Schopenhauer to create his own ethics based on the feeling of compassion – acting for the benefit of others.

V I

Sixthly, there were several characteristic critiques of Kant's ethics:

1) Hegel's "emptiness charge" i.e. the critique of formalism. Hegel accused Kant of failing to provide precise guidelines for a moral life, he claimed that Kant describes no particular man in a particular situation. But, this critique is based on misinterpretations of Kant's thought. Kant did not consider morale to be a "science" about happiness, but about *deserving happiness*. As a result, Hegel abandoned the notion ethics in his system and introduced the term *Sittenlehre*.

2) Excluding other motives, first of all love, from motives for a moral act, was criticized by many, first of all Friedrich Schiller who claimed "I serve my friends often, but I do it with love. Therefore, it hurts me not to be full of virtues"

3) In his *Critique of dialectical reason*, Jean-Paul Sartre utters the famous example "Sartre's pupil". The situation is: In occupied France, in World War II, a young man, Sartre's pupil, is in a doubt whether to leave his ill mother, who depends on him and to go to England and join the free French and fight for the liberation of his homeland. Let us now recall the second formulation of the categorical imperative "Act so that you treat humanity in your personality and the personality of the others always as an end and never only as means". If he leaves his mother, he shall be treating her as a mean and the fighters as ends, and vice-versa, staying with his mother means treating her as an aim, and the fellow countryman as means. Sartre's pupil experiences true despair, and abandonment, which are key notions of Sartre's existentialism. It seems that the categorical imperative cannot give an undoubtable answer for this dilemma. Sartre gives his pupil a straightforward, but not particularly helpful advice. You are free, therefore choose.

V I I

Seventhly, I shall mention some personal reasons for supporting Kant's ethics. I consider Kant's deontological ethics to be supreme compared to any form of "content determined" ethics. For instance, utilitarianism claims that an act is moral if it produces biggest benefit for the greatest number of people. Let us consider a practical example. I am a doctor and have received four victims of a car accident. They all need organ replacements, but none are currently available. At the same time, a young, healthy and innocent young man called Adam comes to the hospital for a regular check-up. Thinking utilitarian would mean, if I cut up Adam and give his organs to the victims of the car accident, one dies and four live. That is the benefit for the greatest number of people. But doing so would obviously mean committing a murder. Something must be wrong with this ethics. Let us remember the second formulation of the categorical imperative. There's the problem, thinking utilitarian disrespects the categorical imperative – cutting up Adam would mean treating him only as means.

Furthermore, my support for Kant's ethics stems out of my attitude, that disregarding formal norms for ethical acting might lead to radical moral relativism. But, most important, I consider Kant's ethics to be contemporary, because it preserves the vertical of values, and opposes putting all values into the same level of validity.

Conclusion

Finally, let us evaluate the points, modernity, and contemporarity of Kant's ethics after comparing them to "content determined" ethics:

- 1) Kant formulated the categorical imperative as an a priori norm, which, though formal and rigorous, offers coherent criteria for leading a moral life.
- 2) He does not see freedom in lawlessness, but in voluntarily subordinating ourselves to the moral law prescribed by our reason itself, out of itself.
- 3) His deontological ethics provides coherent a priori norms for moral acting, what hedonistic-eudaimonistic and utilitarian ethics are not able to do.
- 4) His modernity is expressed in his universal call for emancipation, for free uttering of our reason, what, considered in a wider context of Enlightenment, represents the very foundation of the modern human.
- 5) I find his contemporaneity in insisting on human dignity and preserving the vertical of values in a time, when these are seriously endangered.