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1977

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Potter, Nelson T., "Kant As Internalist: The Synthetic A Priori Proposition Of Kant's Ethical Theory" (1977).
Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences and Affiliated Societies. 440.
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KANT AS INTERNALIST:
THE SYNTHETIC A PRIORI PROPOSITION OF KANT'S ETHICAL THEORY

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Kant claims that his categorical imperative is a synthetic, a priori proposition, but he does not make clear what makes this proposition synthetic or a priori. In this essay it is argued that in Kant's view the proposition is synthetic a priori because it states a quasi-psychological fact: that rational beings are capable of acting from purely moral motives. This means that Kant is an "internalist" in W.D. Falk's sense.

† † †

I

Kant tells us that the categorical imperative is a synthetic a priori proposition (1902-42, 4:420). We know from the *Critique of Pure Reason* that such propositions are likely to be very important but also very difficult to justify. And, indeed, we find that Kant believes the categorical imperative to state a very important proposition and to be very difficult to justify (1902-42, 4:420, 444-445). Further, he believes it important to justify this proposition, because if it cannot be justified, then morality may be merely a "phantom of the brain" (1902-42, 4:445). Although Kant covers much difficult and important ground in moral theory in the first two chapters of the *Grundlegung*, he leaves the task of justification of the categorical imperative to the notoriously difficult and obscure third and final chapter.

In this paper I wish, first, to set forth briefly an interpretation of what the synthetic a priori proposition *is* that Kant is seeking to justify. What this proposition is is not obvious; indeed, though little has been written on this subject in recent literature, there is potential for controversy and dispute. It seems important to understand just what this proposition is because without such knowledge we cannot understand Kant's attempted justification of the proposition.

Second, I will discuss briefly some consequences of my interpretation, and in particular the idea that Kant is an "internalist" in Falk's (1947-8) and Frankena's (1958) sense of that term.

Finally, in an appendix I will mention a textual problem faced by this and other interpretations of Kant on this point.

II

As is well known, Kant states a number of different

formulations of the categorical imperative, which he claims are equivalent to what is commonly called the "first formulation." He (1902-42, 4:413) says:

There is therefore 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.*"

The emphasized proposition might not seem a promising candidate for a synthetic a priori proposition. For one thing, it is an imperative. Usually only sentences in the indicative are said to be either synthetic or analytic, but this is easily remedied, for Kant says that "imperatives are expressed by an ought." Thus we may rewrite the categorical imperative:

(Persons) ought to act only on maxims through which they can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

And, to make the subject-predicate nature of the proposition more explicit, we might further rewrite it:

(Persons) are things that ought to act only on maxims, etc.

We might further ask just what Kant intends the subject of the sentence to be, the subject which we have so far indicated with an expression intended to be as neutral as possible—"Persons." There are strong textual indications, both in the *Grundlegung* and elsewhere, that Kant intends the subject to be "rational beings" or "a rational being" (1902-42, 4:420n, 426-427, 435, 438, 440; 5:46; 4:26-28).

Furthermore, let us alter our predicate so that we may concentrate our discussion on the issues of present interest. In Chapter One of the *Grundlegung*, Kant analyzes the concept of the good will, showing by conceptual analysis (admittedly controversial) that a good will acts only from the motive of duty and that the principle of actions from the motive of duty is the purely formal principle that is stated by the first formulation of the categorical imperative (1974). The point of this analysis, it seems to me, is to analyze the general concept of morality, or the idea of what it is to be in possession of a moral nature. I propose to substitute the pre-

analytic concept of having a moral nature for the analyzed formulation of the categorical imperative, because the issues I wish to consider in this essay do not deal with whether the Kantian analysis of these concepts is correct or with, for example, relations between the different formulations of the categorical imperative, but rather with these pre-analytic concepts and the light that consideration of them may throw on the nature of "the categorical imperative." Thus, we have the following principle, stated in largely pre-analytic terms, a principle which is presupposed by the categorical imperative:

A rational being is a being with a moral nature.

This proposition, then, is synthetic a priori (1902-42, 4:26-28).

But just what does it mean to be in possession of a moral nature? I would like to suggest three possible meanings:

- (1) To be subject to the moral law in the sense of being morally responsible for one's actions.
- (2) To be aware of moral principles, moral considerations, on occasion to judge one's own and others' actions by moral principles, perhaps on occasion to feel guilt, indignation, and other moral feelings.
- (3) To be capable of acting from purely moral motives.

Kant pretty clearly intended (1) as part of the meaning of morality. Surely for Kant to be a moral being and not to be accountable for one's actions would be a contradiction. At times Kant seems even to use "accountable" and "moral" as synonyms (1902-42, 4:26-28).

It also seems that the kinds of things mentioned under (2) are, in Kant's view, associated with having a moral nature. Kant discusses moral emotions, in particular "respect," as an important ethical concept and an indispensable moral emotion (1902-42, 4:400; 5:71ff). The idea that we are conscious of a "moral law within" ourselves is a recurring idea in Kant's moral philosophy (1902-42, 5:29-30, 161); this consciousness serves a key role in the very justification of the categorical imperative in the second *Critique* (1902-42, 5:29-31). Finally, when we read Kant's lectures on education (they are primarily on *moral* education), we find that he believes that the moral law is within each of us; education consists only of leading it out and bringing it to full consciousness (1902-42, 9:437-500).

But it might be asked: Are these characteristic moral phenomena *analytically* or *synthetically* associated with the concept of a moral being, or of morality as such? Perhaps, for example, respect, though in Kant's view clearly associated with morality for all human beings, is not, according to

him, part of the concept of morality, but rather simply an associated phenomenon. I think this objection is difficult to answer. Some of the things mentioned under (2) may well have been intended by Kant to be part of the concept of morality or of a moral being, but it would be, I believe, difficult to show. Thus, for the present we must leave the question of meaning (2) unresolved.

Is (3) a part of the meaning of "moral being"? Before trying to answer this question, let us consider briefly what it means if the answer is "yes." One of the more interesting consequences is that Kant would be an internalist, in the meaning of that term used by W.D. Falk (1947-8) and William Frankena (1958). An "internalist" believes that a reference to the existence of motives in the agent must be made in the analysis of a moral judgment; the "externalist" denies this (1958:41). If (3) is true, i.e., if to be a moral being one must be capable of acting from purely moral motives, then, since moral judgments are true only of moral beings, one of the truth conditions for any moral judgment (and hence part of its meaning) will be the proposition that the agent is capable of acting from purely moral motives. (Perhaps it is worth noting here that Kant believes that even the morally evil and depraved man will be moved to act out of moral motives in cases where such action will not conflict with his own selfish desires and interests; hence in Kant's view, moral motivation will not be a mere theoretical capability, but a dispositional motive in the sense of "an occurrent motive under certain conditions.")

Let us ask again, Is (3) also part of the meaning of "moral being"? I think the correct answer is "Yes." Throughout the *Grundlegung* Kant is concerned with moral motivation when he is discussing the categorical imperative. For example, at the beginning of Chapter Two, when he is considering the question of whether morality may not be a "phantom of the human imagination" (1902-42, 4:407), the question he considers is whether a morally *motivated* action has ever been performed (1902-42, 4:407-408). And Kant—when he raises in Chapter Two the question of whether the categorical imperative is "possible"—seems to be asking, once again, a question about the possibility of moral motivation (1902-42, 4:417-420). Again, his discussion of autonomy is largely in terms of *motivation*; heteronomy is said to be the will's being determined by something outside itself; whereas, autonomy is the will's self-determination (1902-42, 4:431-433). Also, in the second *Critique*, the question is stated: Can pure reason be practical? And if pure reason can be practical, this means, Kant tells us, that ". . . of itself and independently of everything empirical it [i.e., pure reason] can determine the will" (1902-42, 5:42). So, once again, the question concerns "determination of the will" and, hence, motivation.

If (3) is, indeed, correct, that is, if to be a moral being is to be capable of acting from purely moral motivation, and if Kant, in justifying the categorical imperative, is mainly trying to justify the proposition that all rational beings possess

this capability (in virtue of their being moral beings), what follows?

A. We might ask, why should Kant feel the necessity of some purely rational, non-sensuous motivation necessarily connected with morality? There are, no doubt, many reasons. One set of reasons surrounds his discussion of autonomy; any motivation *other* than such a purely rational, moral motivation would be heteronomous, would come from outside; hence, in following it, we would not so much be acting as be acted upon. But perhaps just as interesting is a related point: Heteronomous motives are only contingently related to morally required actions; perhaps we will have the heteronomous motivations necessary to do what is morally required of us (e.g., perhaps we were born and/or bred to be kindly persons)—but then again, *perhaps not*. There is no necessity that any heteronomous, sensuous motive will be adequate to move us to do what is morally required; and if these were the only motives available to us, there would be no certainty that, in a given instance, we *could* have done what was morally required of us. But a purely rational, moral motive, if it exists, is always and in every case capable of providing a motive adequate to bring about our doing an action that is otherwise in our power (e.g., not beyond our physical capability). Thus, the capability of acting from purely moral motives brings with it a guarantee of moral responsibility.

B. This interpretation makes Kant an “internalist,” as we have already remarked, but not one who will have to “trim obligation to the size of individual motives” (1958: 80), since, in Kant’s view, the capability for purely moral motivation will not limit our obligations but will, rather, serve to guarantee them. I cannot adequately consider here whether the kind of motivation which Kant claims lies at the basis of morality really is a possible kind of motivation (1965:301-349). I am inclined to believe that such motives are possible and that this can be seen when we once understand such motives: They cannot be interpreted metaphysically, as Kant did; I find it hard to take seriously Kant’s metaphysical story of noumenal causes of moral action. But perhaps a formula such as the following may be useful, as well as Kantian in spirit: One acts from morally good motives if he does what is right for the reasons that it is right. All that this formula for morally good motives requires is that the justifying reasons (those features of the situation in virtue of which an action is correctly concluded to be right, wrong, etc.) be one and the same as motivating reasons. This may not be an impossible demand.

APPENDIX

There is a text in Kant which directly conflicts with the interpretation of the synthetic a priori proposition of Kant’s ethical theory that I have just put forward, and which conflicts, I believe, with most other reasonable interpretations of Kant. I propose to mention and briefly discuss this text, without being able to propose any very satisfactory way of inter-

preting it or dealing with the problems that it presents to the interpreter.

A text is more significant for a given point of interpretation, the more explicit it is on that point and the more prominently placed in the author’s text the point is. I must say, however, that I believe that no text, no matter how explicit or prominently placed, can by itself overturn an interpretation that is broadly based on a variety of other textual and argumentative sources; thus, I do not believe that this text confutes the interpretation of Kant that I have just proposed. (It may be added that one reason I feel this way is that I do not see *any* plausible interpretation for this text; there seems to be *no* way to make very good sense of it.)

The text occurs in the third paragraph of Chapter Three of the *Grundlegung*. Kant (1902-42, 4:447) proposes to state explicitly what the synthetic, a priori proposition to be justified in this chapter is:

Nevertheless the principle of morality is still a synthetic proposition, namely: “An absolutely good will is one whose maxim can always have as its content itself considered as a universal law”; for we cannot discover this characteristic of its maxim by analyzing the concept of an absolutely good will.

This passage certainly rates high in both explicitness and prominence. But it is hard to make sense of what Kant has here said. The proposition that he says is synthetic, a priori is, or seems to be, the same one that Kant’s argument of Chapter One of the *Grundlegung* attempted to show to be an *analytic* proposition (1974). Thus, I cannot at all see why Kant says what he says in this passage; he seems to misspeak himself. And perhaps, finally, that is the most reasonable interpretation of this passage, as a misspeaking, or as a slip of the pen. I wish I had a more satisfying proposal to make concerning the text.

Let me just note, in conclusion, that if instead of “good will” in the alleged synthetic a priori proposition, Kant had written “rational will,” this sentence and the discussion of it that follows would make much more sense.

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