

REASON, TOTALITY AND FREEDOM IN KANT

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Abstract. One misunderstands Kant's ethical approach when one requires him to show the 'origin' of his moral values in human consciousness. They are not 'found' strictly speaking. They do not hide anywhere waiting to be discovered, but they are postulated, and through this postulation, they make intelligible morality as a specific domain of human existence and not as a tradition-based set of behaviors that are applied automatically as psychological reflexes.

Keywords: Kant, reason, laws of nature, freedom, categorical imperative.

In Kant, the moral agent is not a *purely* rational agent: it is a human being endowed with rationality *and* sensibility. Therefore, this agent never acts purely rationally. What is more, reason, in general, has no goal (in the ordinary sense) for its causality. Its causality is a causality of freedom. This means that the cause, which the reason is, is not determined by any other previous cause and that reason cannot be an 'effect'. The reason, in Kant, is rather a judge and has no interest or concern in the satisfaction of any particular human desire. In fact, the reason is a kind of calculating faculty operating in morality similarly to the way it works while creating the lawful nature around us.

The sole motive of the reason is (functional) totality, in Kant, which is seen in its striving to bring everything under an idea¹, be it the idea of the world, the soul, or God. On the other hand, Kant also acknowledges the possibility that reason (understanding) and sensibility grow from the same root, which he says remains unknown² to us. This is why reason only *appears* to have an 'interest' in that totality, being somehow 'attracted' to it and therefore being something more than a simple calculating faculty. Such an 'interest' or 'attraction' might be attributed to the mark of transcendental imagination, which, in Kant, shapes more or less all

¹ Kant says: "we are speaking here about the totality of conditions and the unconditioned, as the common title of all concepts of reason". Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 400 (A324/B380).

² *Ibidem*, p. 135 (A15/B29).

human faculties, which made M. Heidegger say that this imagination was the ‘unknown root’ of sensibility and understanding in Kant³.

However, this interest is very different from any interest of a particular individual because it is not related to any particular desire of an individual but to a sort of desire that is identical in all possible rational beings. To understand what such an interest might be, we could compare it with the relationship between the hunger and appetite of a particular human, who, in his craving for nourishment, is always hungry for a specific type of food, with the idea of a craving for food *in general*, which we cannot imagine but which would be present in all humans. In the same way, reason has an interest in preserving the world as a totality, which means as an ordered and functional totality. This interest is not something particular to one person or another but is the same in all possible rational beings, which means not only in all human beings: it is a universal desire with a universal object of desire – something, indeed, hard to imagine.

Reason sees itself confronted with various impulses of sensibility, the other element of the human being. It does not accept the satisfaction of certain impulses because they are in themselves better than the others, but because they are compatible with the totality of human society and existence. This is why the Kantian categorical imperative has the form of a law, like the laws of nature. The latter make nature possible as a totality. In the same way, moral laws aim at making human society possible as a totality.

To some extent, the argument that reason has an interest in totalities is phenomenological. It is a thesis stated about the human mind *in general*, a thesis that, like any other thesis, is based on a generalization of what is seen in common experience. The Aristotelian definition of man as a ‘social being’ is also such a thesis, something stated because we have always seen humans as what we expect humans to be like among other human beings.

Kant’s statement concerning reason’s interest in totalities is based on the argument that in all domains of human experience – be it the material phenomena around us, the internal phenomena of our consciousness, and the question of an unconditioned cause – human thought spontaneously endeavors to consider them as a unity. In other words, when contemplating material processes and things around us, humans have always spontaneously tended to conceive them as part of an all-encompassing unity called the ‘world’ or, nowadays, the ‘universe’. This is visible not only in all present cultures and societies but also in all the other cultures of human history. Similarly, concerning what people experience within their consciousness: all mental images (thoughts, memories, emotions, sensations, and so forth) have been thought of as building a unity, the human soul, despite the fact that they, like the things of the material ‘universe,’ are extremely diverse and rarely show any immediate unity with each other. A final need of human thought is to

³ M. Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, translated by James S. Churchill, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1965, pp. 144–150.

conceive all the existing causes and things in the world as originating in an ultimate cause that is no longer caused by any other previous cause: an ultimate cause called God. Now, although we do not perceive any of these entities (the world, the soul, God), we feel an *irresistible* need to imagine the whole of existence encompassed by them and thus to postulate those entities. They are thus entities of the mind, *entia rationis*. (Even atheists, despite the fact that they deny the existence of God or the soul, speak of the ‘universe,’ the ‘sum of things,’ the ‘multiverse’ and so forth, imagining thus that what exists outside of us somehow builds a totality. This need of reason has the same nature as the impossibility for our thought to stop at the edge of the universe, at the point where we think that the universe ends, both in space and time. Hearing that the universe ends somewhere, we cannot stop asking ourselves, ‘But what is beyond that limit?’ simply because we cannot imagine that the universe, with its space and time, can stop existing somewhere.)

This drive to establish (imaginary) totalities is also of the same kind as the (subjective/transcendental) necessity to establish rules for nature: as is well-known, for Kant, for example, causality is not something that belongs to nature itself but a way in which the human mind copes with the diversity of what it encounters around itself. We see the boiling water and the flame beneath the pot containing the boiling water, and we connect them, imagining and saying that the flame is the cause of the water’s boiling. But, as Hume long ago pointed out, we do not see anywhere the reason why these two phenomena are so necessarily related to each other in our experience. Hume called this necessity a habit, whereas Kant called it a scheme of (the transcendental) imagination.

As a consequence, because of all such templates that our mind applies instinctively to nature, we cannot accept that any phenomenon can escape these rules. Concerning causality, we cannot imagine or think that any phenomenon could ever occur without some previous cause. But we rarely realize that this necessity is not of nature but of our mind.

Now, in the same way in which we experience the material world around us, we experience the fact that humans live among other humans, in society. Because reason has the innate tendency to consider each of its possible objects as a unity (one of the mind’s categories being in Kant precisely that of ‘unity,’ meaning that whatever we deal with – a pencil, an organism, the sky above us, a plant or the language that we speak – we imagine them as unities, despite their tremendous internal variety: we imagine each of them as being *one* thing), it considers human society such a totality and unity too.

On the other hand, humans are active beings; they act moved by many motivations. The problem was then for Kant how to reconcile the multitude of humans’ motivations with the reason’s image of unity and totality embodied in human society. In Kant, reason does not only establish unities but these unities must also be non-contradictory unities. In other words, the human mind functions based on what is called the principle of non-contradiction. Therefore, reason must find a way of creating not only the image of a society as a unity but also a

non-contradictory image or concept of that society, that is to say, an image in which the members of that totality do not conflict with each other so as to annihilate the said totality from within.

This understanding of human society as unity is different from the unities we find in nature, which always degenerate from within (like an apple that rots), and in which, therefore, we must assume the existence of conflicting parts. Natural unities are not relevant because the members of human society are thought of as free; that is to say, they, as possible members of a ‘rational’ society (a society such as reason can think of), must act not as being driven by causes external to them, but only by what they think rationally that they must do. In other words, reason must conceive a non-contradictory human society in the same way in which, while endeavoring to explain the world as a totality, it must think of the elements residing within the world as cooperating with each other dynamically in order for the totality of the world to be functional. As Kant points out⁴ in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, if anything in our experience constantly changed – for example, if the television set in front of us changed from one moment to another into a bicycle, then into a dog, then into a lightning bolt and so forth – human experience and, for that matter, the world as such, could never emerge. Keeping in mind that the coherence of things is the product of our mind, the coherence of human society is something that, because it is not naturally and factually given, must be created according to the same criteria of internal non-contradiction.

Thus Kant’s question is, how shall we think of a human society in which humans do not negate or contradict the whole, the totality? What we see in history is precisely this eternal conflict between people, that is to say, the continuous tendency of humans to annihilate human society, to contradict the totality. It is almost a miracle that humans did not disappear long ago, given their history marked so deeply by their suicidal irresponsibility.

This being the case, such a logically coherent society is possible only if we take as a model what is already working (but at the unconscious level) as a product of the human mind, namely nature. The totality of nature works as a totality based on laws. As a consequence, we can assume that a functional society based on the model of reason is a society in which the relationship between humans is based on self-imposed laws. (We must speak of self-imposed laws and not simply laws because externally imposed laws are the effect of the wills of other more powerful human beings, who have imposed them on their fellow beings and, due to this, they inevitably create vast social tension, which always threatens the existing society.)

Where can human reason find the objects for such self-imposed laws? In our impulses, i.e., in the content of our sensibility. Thus, in order to create a coherent and, therefore, also functional society, human reason generalizes the maxim of any behavior based on whatever existing and demanding impulse transforming it into a universal law that all members of that society will accept and follow, and see then

⁴ Imm. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 229 (A 100–101).

if that society can survive, that is to say, if the maxims of all members do not contradict each other. For example, if someone has the impulse to lie, he can discover if such an impulse is moral or not, if, by generalizing the maxim of the behavior based on that impulse, he understands that human society can survive if all its members lie. It is obvious that such a society would implode because people could not live together by always lying to each other.

While Kant grounds his argument concerning the validity of his categorical imperative on the idea of a nature based on laws, he also claims that the categorical imperative is not a principle holding only for human beings but for all rational beings⁵. In this way, he seems either to assume that nature functions in the same way everywhere and for all rational beings or to make a fallacy by generalizing the lawful nature, as it occurs to us, to all rational beings. A natural law, in Kant, is necessarily a temporal regular relationship between phenomena. But then, natural law is conceived of as depending on human sensibility and its a priori intuition of time. The rule is well-established and also has a mathematical character, which makes it measurable. The lawful character of nature as a 'system'⁶ of things 'determined by universal laws'⁷ means a multitude of individual things that are what they are because they are lawful effects of previous causes and interactions of causes. They are the resultants of a multitude of causal factors. Thus, however isolated a phenomenon looks, it is what it is as such a resultant or compound result.

The metaphysical statement in Kant's moral philosophy that the categorical imperative holds for any rational being is accompanied by the claim that reason and the rational character of a being are endowed with the highest value. This statement is not grounded on anything else, being a sort of metaphysical explanation that must be distinguished from the theoretical metaphysical explanation where one can be allowed to search for external causes. In morality, one must look for something like internal causes, namely 'motives,' that are 'laws of what ought to happen'⁸.

In other words, Kant claims that when I need a moral orientation, I must not be concerned with what there is but with what there must be, and that what there must be does not result immediately from what there is. In this sense, moral values cannot exist in the same way in which inclinations or needs exist. They ground our behavior and do not cause it (in the sense of natural causation).

The fact that 'rationality' is an end in itself, i.e., one must recognize it as the highest value, is not something derived but a postulate that grounds morality. And such a postulate operates similarly as postulates or principles operate in

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by James W. Ellington, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1993, p. 33.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

science. As in science, such principles cannot be grounded. Do the principles of Newtonian physics require any demonstration? No, they ground any further or future demonstration. That means that when Kant searches for a basis for his moral philosophy, he adopts the procedure of (Newtonian) science. Therefore, he introduces such a postulate about rationality as the supreme value, a value in relationship to which all other actions are only means.

By postulating that rational nature has the highest value, one is not required to explain why one does this, as you are not required to explain why you recognize the Newtonian principles. They are principles. Such a postulate allows you to rank human behaviors and know beforehand what you must do.

Let's briefly follow the similarity with the procedure of science. Here, one says that every body, once set in motion, will continue to move if no external force acts on it. Or that every action has a reaction, and the reaction is stated as having the same magnitude as the previous action. Such principles are not based on any experience, nor are they deduced from other superior principles. Still, they are considered universal features of all material bodies that allow scientists subsequently to calculate the different ways in which bodies can move concretely.

Similarly, the principle that rationality is an end in itself determines beforehand the whole domain of our possible behaviors. It is likewise the result of a rational imagination and generalization, as the Newtonian principles are. It is not necessarily evident, as none of those principles are.

One can also notice Kant's transcendental approach concerning human freedom in this context. In Kant, freedom is not something that can be proved but a postulated 'fact' from which one must start any moral investigation. If one assumes that man has no free choice, then no morality is possible. Therefore, human freedom is a necessary postulate or a 'fact' of human reason that accompanies the postulate of the highest value of rationality. In this respect, Kant repeatedly remarks that one cannot prove that any of the human so-called behaviors are ever purely moral because there can always be assumed or even detected an unconscious inclination, impulse, or interest for that behavior that transforms that behavior into an automatic reflex taking place entirely on the level of the phenomena or of the naturally and causally connected processes.

The transcendental approach to the moral realm consists of the question of how a (pure) moral behavior takes place and what conditions make such a behavior possible. The answer is that to have morality, we need two postulates: first, that rational nature has the highest value, and second, that there is human freedom. The fact of human freedom functions here not as something that can be proved but as something that grounds any moral action. As you cannot prove that, in an ideal case, a body set in motion on which no external force ever acts will keep its motion eternally, you cannot prove that human freedom really exists. This freedom is only a principle that allows you to assess any moral action.

On the other hand, as he proceeds in his theoretical philosophy, in morality, Kant starts from existing realities. In his theoretical philosophy, he acknowledges the existence of mathematics, logic, or physics as real sciences and asks in what their possibility consists. Then, he builds a system of elements that can make these sciences intelligible, i.e., as sciences or types of necessary and universal knowledge that can anticipate reality. He endeavors to answer the question of how it is possible that human knowledge can anticipate so accurately the development of reality. Similarly, in morality, he starts from the reality that morality exists and that people behave morally. He does not claim to invent any new moral rule because moral rules have long since been present. He just wants to give an explanation of what makes this existing morality logically possible. But not in the sense of the real possibility – similar to what causes produce particular effects and thus make them ‘possible’. But in the sense of making that morality intelligible.

Let’s take a concrete example: when one researches the human being’s history and present, one finds the demand of not lying in all human moral codes. Kant’s approach is not that there are certain other beliefs or traditions that ground such a behavior, constraining someone to follow them and, by this, to behave causally, like an ordinary phenomenon. But that we must make intelligible such a behavior not as an effect of a previous phenomenal cause but as the result of a human will acting freely and knowing exactly how to act and why it must act in that way and not differently.

Consequently, one misunderstands Kant’s approach when one requires Kant to show the ‘origin’ of his moral values. They are not ‘found’ strictly speaking. They do not hide anywhere waiting to be discovered, but they are postulated, and through this postulation, they make intelligible morality as morality and not as a tradition-based set of behaviors. According to the latter interpretation, humans act morally only because they were trained to behave that way, not because they really wanted to do so. Also, such a view holds that humans are not moral beings at all but only some sort of automata that inherit moral values and apply them blindly. Morality, as Kant very often emphasizes, is a matter of freedom, of postulating the existence of a free agent. (The basis for moral behavior is not external, namely how others would assess my behavior, and thus, I ought to behave morally only to avoid contradicting others. But it must be internal because when I choose, my choice must be self-centered. For example, if I do not want to lie, I need to have my own reasons, and not the reason of fearing what others would say if I lie. When all human actions are only based on interests, no morality is possible because morality is – ideally – a space of altruism. Even if only a few types of behavior were selfless or appeared to be selfless and thus moral, one still would need to explain how such a moral, selfless behavior is possible.) Of course, one can deny that humans are or can be moral and maintain that they are only automata. Which Kant actually, as we saw, would not completely deny since he argues that we can never completely prove that something moral-looking is completely disinterested.

But the point is not how, factually, our behaviors happen (we can know this only *post-factum*, i.e., only after the action or behavior happened) but how they *must* happen, how I know *beforehand* in what direction I must act. And this is something that no factual research can ever discover.

If one acts only based on interests, one will help others sometimes and sometimes not (which usually also happens, indeed). However, as moral persons, we know that we must help others, and we often do this due to this knowledge. Moral values allow us to anticipate reality and our future behavior. If one acts only based on interests and on what one feels, then one's behaviors would be unpredictable because one cannot predict feelings. Society itself would not be possible. How many times do children cherish bad feelings toward their parents and still take care of them when they are old because of the moral values that they acknowledge? How many times have victors not spared the life of the defeated without any interest, only because of respect for their heroism?

Morality is part of our society and culture. We cannot remove morality. We will always need to know beforehand how we must behave in different situations and refuse to act only based on our feelings and impulses. If one accepts that one can act only based on interests and emotions, then our behaviors would easily become chaotic.

In this light, the Hobbesian theory of the social contract, according to which people started living together and giving up violence only because they understood their interests better, must be amended in the sense that here humans cannot be thought of as being only beasts. Beasts or animals cannot *understand* their own interests and build accordingly a future life for themselves. Beasts fight against each other to death or until they are subdued and transformed into slaves. Only if one assumes that those 'wolves' are endowed with an original latent moral discernment is it possible to assume that they are able to give up violence and transfer it to others who represent them, the rulers.