

The Practical Outcome of Kant's Philosophy for Religious and Social Life

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In dealing with a subject such as the practical outcome of Kant's philosophy I am quite aware that there are people who would not easily agree that there can be any practical outcome of philosophy at all. Looking on modern philosophical endeavour, sometimes one may feel very much inclined to ask oneself: What is this all good for? The Greeks would not have tolerated a philosophy which was restricted to merely theoretical observations without using, at the same time, such observations as an instrument for the discovery of a guiding principle for the life of men. Plato appreciated the philosopher according to his faculty to build up human society. The startling fact that he did not want to have poets or musicians among the citizens of his ideal city is explained by himself to his interlocutors by the equally startling question, if they believed that Homer or any man of that kind ever had given good laws to a city, or that he would have been able to do so.

The categorical imperative

It happens that Kant was of the same mind as Plato was. Not exactly in regard of poets or musicians, but surely in regard of the responsibility of the philosopher for the well-doing of men. There is a much quoted autobiographical confession among the reflections which Kant left behind, in which he says that he would not think his philosophical undertaking worth his while if he could not contribute by it to the vindication of the rights of humanity. But it

is precisely the principle of Kant's practical philosophy, the famous categorical imperative, that has been most severely criticized on account of its presumed uselessness for practical purposes. 'Act in such a way that you can will the maxim of your action to be a universal law.' This principle has been accused of meaning nothing at all. There is no maxim, it has been said, which one could not will, according to circumstances, to be a general law. Take, for instance, the maxim not to help others when they are in need of help. If there is a wealthy man who is in the possession of all means of a happy life, which men might grant to each other, why should he not will the maxim not to help others to be a general law? Or take a powerful man who need not be afraid of being overwhelmed by other people's might; why should he not consent to a law which says that men's rights should be determined by their strength, their forces, their power, or whatever you may call it? Of course, once you have proposed a certain aim to yourself, then you cannot will some maxim to be a law if by its being a law the realization of what you aim at becomes impossible. But then the possibility to will that a maxim should be a law will depend on what men happen to aim at. And therefore the categorical imperative itself will no longer be a law, by which any general rule of conduct could be determined.

Such objections have been raised against Kant's moral principle ever since he

gave publicity to it, and they continue to be raised by modern philosophical writers. How can they be answered?

Before giving my answer, I should like to make some general observations. You must not think that, on account of the categorical imperative, Kant was a man who would not have had anything done in social life without maxims. A husband who regulates the tenderness he graciously bestows to his wife by a maxim would not seem to her a much desirable consort. She likes to be cherished, because he likes it; nor should I like very much to be the object of matrimonial tenderness on the basis of maxims. There are fortunately many things in human life which need no maxim at all, that means things for which the only possible maxim is to have none at all. You may have the maxim to shave every morning, and if you want to be sure that shaving every morning is not immoral, you may ask yourself if you can will the maxim that every male and adult person should shave daily in the morning to be a general law. Evidently you can. But if you are fond of beards, it happens that you can equally will the maxim not to shave at all to be a general law and this would be possible even for those who prefer shaving. Of course, if the maxim to wear beards becomes a general law, those who shave will have to give up shaving, and they may dislike that. But to dislike something and not to be able to will it, these are two very different things. If Kant says you cannot will it to be a law, he means that to will it would be altogether in contradiction with every possible determination of human will, not only in contradiction with some specific end as, for instance, a nice shave or a nice beard. Thus you may will that shaving should be a law as well as you may will that beards should be imposed by law; and in this way, we get the conclusion that the maxim not to have

maxims at all in regard to the barber's business would be in perfect accordance with the categorical imperative. This imperative itself tells you that in such cases you may do as you feel inclined to do and that means that things of this kind are morally indifferent.

But if we now return to the man who has the maxim not to help others in case of need, things take quite a different turn. If he wills his maxim to be a law, then he has to accept the refusal even in such cases in which he himself is in need of help. Therefore his will must be a will which can will that, for instance, food is denied to him when he is starving, while his neighbour has his house full of provisions. If he can will that, then he must be able to will his own unhappiness, But such a will would no more be a will. For without happiness as an end for our will, with which we necessarily agree, no principle for any material determination of our will would be left. But a will without any possible determinability of its material ends would no more be a will. And therefore Kant is quite entitled to say that no man can will the maxim of egotism to be a general law; in other words, egotism is forbidden by the categorical imperative.

In the same way, you may consider the maxim that the rights of men, that is, their liberty in regard to each other, should depend on their mutual strength. This simply *is* not a law. It means lawlessness in regard to the termination of liberty. So it is wrong to say that Kant's moral law is a principle which either imposed an absolute intolerable rigorism on men's life, or a purely abstract principle without any practical consequences at all.

God, reason and faith

We shall now take up a second point: 'I had got to remove knowledge in order to

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prepare the way for faith.' The knowledge Kant has removed by his critique of pure reason is the science of God and supernatural things. And the way which he prepared for faith is the way from morality to faith. But just this way has again been the object of the most severe criticism. Since the appearance of *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant has been accused on the ground that he by his so-called foundation of religion had altogether spoiled his own moral teaching. Just after having firmly established the independence of the moral law from all regard to material ends, that is, to happiness, Kant tells us that regard to happiness is inevitable for men, and therefore they should believe in God as the only Being which can grant them that happiness. Is that not as contradictory as it is trivial? I shall believe in God, because I want to be happy? But then all dull people will believe in God, because they want to be happy; and no reasonable man will, because it is quite clear that merely longing for happiness is not a sufficient reason to believe that there is someone who will grant it.

What is the answer to these questions? First of all, it is by no means true that Kant had ever forgotten his own teaching, that the moral law in its binding force is independent of all regard to possible ends of the human will. That means, it is not true that I have got to follow the moral law, because otherwise I could not reach some end which I may have already proposed to myself for this or that reason. Kant holds firmly the view that all moral teaching before him has been wrong by vainly trying to derive the obligatory character of the law from the pretended necessity for any matter to be an end for the human will. In this respect Kant has never wavered.

But the moral law is not a law that forbids men to have ends; nor does it forbid men to pursue their own happiness. A will without ends, or a will which has no matter

at all, would not be a possible will; and a moral law, which forbids men to have ends, would be a law which forbids the will any determined volition. That would mean it forbids willing. This of course would be a contradiction. In fact, the law does not prevent men from having ends and therefore from pursuing their happiness, but it only puts this inevitable end of man's will under a certain condition, viz. the condition of morality. Therefore the moral law, instead of being dependent, on any end, *produces* a new ultimate end for men, and this end is happiness under the condition of morality. In other words, the ultimate end of every will which is morally good can only be and must be *its own efficacy* in regard to all its possible ends. The moral law itself advises men to aim at a state of things in which the bad will is doomed to failure, and in which the chances of life are measured according to the moral perfection of those who live that life.

But if the moral law makes it a duty for men to have this aim, this law contains no conditions for its realization, nor can it be considered a duty for men to assume its realizability. Man is quite free to assume or not to assume it. There is no necessity for this assumption or against it, neither in the practical nor in the theoretical reason. This means that man is neither *obliged* to this assumption, nor can he *know* anything about this realizability. But evidently the assumption is a *need* for him as a reasonable being. Without it, his reason cannot be in harmony with itself. If man assumes as impossible what pure practical reason inevitably makes his ultimate end, then by this same assumption he will be deprived of all possible rationality of his doings. There will be no more end for them, and he will be forced to act without knowing what the action is for. His end cannot be happiness alone, for this is forbidden by the moral law,

nor can it reasonably be happiness under the condition of morality, because that is impossible by his own supposition.

Therefore, just by this supposition, man makes himself a fool, for only a fool acts willingly without knowing what for. As long as he sticks to his assumption of the non-realizability of the supreme good, he can escape that foolishness only by revolting against the moral law and taking happiness without regard to this law as his ultimate aim. Then, indeed, he will no more act as a fool, but surely as a scoundrel. It is this dilemma, either to be a fool or a scoundrel, which produces a merely subjective necessity for men to suppose happiness under the condition of morality as a possible effect of their own moral behaviour. Now, according to our human notions, this effect depends in its possibility on the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and holy being, which has all things as things in themselves suitably directed towards the efficacy of moral maxims. In this way the existence of God proves itself as a truth, which cannot be denied without an arbitrary destruction of the possible harmony of reason with itself.

The good of man and society

But it was not only the city of God, the legislation of which received its principle from Kant's categorical imperative, it was also the city of men. This is the third point I propose to consider as a practical outcome of Kant's philosophy. Medieval western thinking up to the eighteenth century had tried to build up this city—I mean the political community of men—on the basis of the supposedly existing providential harmony of the world or of the 'creation'. The reason for the supposition of this harmony is the teleological conception of nature, advanced in classical Greek philosophy and taken over by the Middle Ages. According to this view, man, as the

only being gifted with reason, was the ultimate aim and end of the universal teleology. The world in all its parts was fore-ordained by the Deity to serve his needs. Men wanted, above all, to live in a society with other men, not in a society whatsoever, but in a society in accordance with the requirements of reason. To such a society, they were called by the voice of nature or by the natural law. From this resulted a natural obligation for everyone to consider not only his own needs, conveniences, and comfort, but to take regard to what might enable others not only to live, but also to live in the full sense of a human life. Thus everyone was entitled to live as a man among mankind. That means that such a life was the natural and inalienable right of everyone.

Since nature—as the presupposition was—has provided for all men the law which gives us this right does not entitle us, nor could it entitle us, to use force against anybody. It was a law of charity and friendship. Therefore, according to this law, nobody could be free to kill others, to injure their bodies, or to deprive them of the indispensable supplies for a human life. So far, this law of nature seemed to tell people what they are *not* allowed to do. Conversely, everybody seems necessarily to be free to perform all those external acts which are indispensable for the conservation of his own existence and of the human race. But from this liberty you could not derive any determined right to reserve things for your own use and to use force against those who want to use them independently from your will. The stick which grows upon the tree is no more useful by nature to myself than to my neighbour. Which of the two of us then shall be entitled by the law of nature to keep it for his own use? '*Natura omnia communia*' (by nature all things belong to all men in common) was a traditional principle for ancient as well as for Christian

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philosophers. How then could there be a general authorization for anybody to interfere with that natural liberty, by which men enjoyed what nature offered to them, and which seemingly made them incapable of being governed and kept by others under the constraint of certain general rules.

Moral authority of state power

On the other hand, there was no society possible among men unless they submitted to some legislative power which was entitled to impose laws upon them and to force them to obey such laws. How then such a power could be justified?

In vain this justification has been sought during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It could not have been found as long as the political society in its moral aspect was considered to be an instrument in order to realize that ultimate good which was ordered by the law of nature. Only when conformity of maxims with possible laws for our will was discovered as the supreme moral precept, obedience to an existing power merely on the reason that it was capable of giving laws to men could be considered a moral duty. As long as the moral law was considered to be a precept for man's purposes, no political power could be established with sufficient moral authority. Its competence to use force against its subjects always depended on the condition that this force was used to promote the supreme good. But no human will could be considered in an *a priori* conformity, with this supreme good. Therefore no human will ever could have an *a priori* and undisputed authority to enforce laws upon peoples. No settled sovereignty then was possible.

Kant has shown us that the moral authority of any existing political power resides entirely in its physical power to make people act according to laws. It is not the morality of the governor which legitimates

his claim to obedience, but the moral law claims that we should pay obedience to those who have the physical power to give us laws. This does not in any way mean that a powerful person should have the right to exact from us whatever he likes. He has no right whatsoever to give commands which cannot have the character of laws in regard to the will of men. Thus a command which inflicts death upon men on account of their religious conviction or of their race cannot be a lawful restriction of their freedom, for it makes this freedom independent of their will. Nobody owes obedience to such a command, even if it has been given by the supreme master of the state, nor can it bestow any competence upon any one whosoever he may be. Everybody is entitled to act as if this command did not exist at all; he is even obliged to act so.

In this way, Kant's theory of the juridical law clarifies the limits which are set to state power by the law of humanity and which have often seemed so obscure. But on the other hand no licence is given by Kant to try to upset state power on the reason that the laws given by the governing forces are in contradiction not to the law of humanity, but to the political rights of the subjects. There can be no political right in contradiction to the right of those who are in possession of the legislative power—a power by which alone the state itself has its possibility. Therefore, according to Kant, all political progress depends on reforms carried on by the actually ruling power. Every revolutionary act against the existing constitution on whatsoever reason is, on the contrary, an unlawful and condemnable act. The existing state power has a lawful claim to be respected as such by its own subjects as well as by the other powers, regardless of all national claims. If it could be overthrown, peace and justice on earth would be impossible, for national claims have no law

which makes them *a priori* compatible, and the actually existing powers are the only ones by whose voluntary understanding, or by whose internal reforms, peace and justice could be secured all around.

For this anti-revolutionary teaching, Kant has been much blamed. If I consider the abnegation of the use of force as a prevailing feature in Indian political sentiment, then I should say that there is a pre-established harmony between this sentiment and Kant's teaching concerning public law. But on the other hand, it is quite evident that not all use of force can be unjustified, if human society is supposed to

have any duration or stability. Now the question is about the principle by which this force possibly can get its legitimation. I do not think that there is any agreement among modern philosophical and political thinkers about the legitimate source of political power, nor could I find this agreement in India. Sometimes force is approved of, sometimes it is severely blamed, but it seems to me very hard to find out by which supreme principle approval or blame has been or is to be determined. For all those who are anxious for that principle, Kant's philosophy of law may be of considerable help even in our days. ■

* An expert in classical German Philosophy Dr Julius Ebbinghaus was formerly Head of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Marburg, Germany. Reproduced here is the text of a lecture he gave at the Institute on 9th January 1958.



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