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What is Categorical about the Categorical?

On the Sensible and the Supersensible

Human experience is dependent upon the inseparable, yet distinguishable, interaction between two dimensions: the sensible and the supersensible. Each dimension must simultaneously make a contribution, or else there can be no experience. Although we must speak of two dimensions that make our experience possible, we are no more talking about dualism as the explanatory ground of experience than attributing multiple, interacting causes to a physical event shatters the unity of efficient causality. We would be concerned with dualism only if we succumbed to a Cartesian dual-substance notion of experience, but that would, of course, presume that we had access to such things as substances that could confirm their reality. Rather, we do not experience substances, only their appearances. Granted, “hardness” (*Unnachgiebigkeit*) and “durableness” (*Dauerhaftigkeit*) are strong indicators of the presence of substance, but we too quickly substitute substance for its appearance. We live in a world of appearances and *a priori* synthetic judgment, and any conclusions about the nature and character of substance are among our synthetic judgments either *a posteriori* or *a priori* since we cannot experience substances themselves.

These two dimensions *appear to be* 180° opposite to one another. The sensible world consists of a set of appearances that are perceptible, material, divisible, measurable, and constantly changing. The supersensible world consists of a set of “appearances” that are imperceptible, immaterial, indivisible, immeasurable, and, when it comes to concepts, unchanging. Observation of these contrasting sets of appearances by no means presumes what needs to be proved. Rather, it is only a contrast between descriptive sets, and it is the task of Critical Idealism to sort out what is necessary and what is purely accidental about these sets of appearances.

Each dimension of appearances must make a contribution if we are to have any experience, much more if we are to consciously comprehend our experience. Critical Idealism maintains that we can have only a truncated grasp of who we are and of our responsibilities in the world if we ignore or minimize the contribution of either dimension. The post entitled “What is Critical Idealism?” provides a suggestion of what must be *added to* our experience of empirical intuition by *a priori* synthetic judgment on the part of transcendental consciousness. The primary focus of that post was what Critical Idealism calls *theoretical reason* or the structures that make it possible for us to understand phenomena, which are driven by *hypothetical imperatives*. Here we are going to focus on *practical reason* or those elements *above nature*, which confront us with *categorical imperatives*.

Hypothetical imperatives arise out of our situations. They are announced whenever we encounter a protasis (“If I want to ...”), and the imperative (the *necessity*) is articulated by the apodosis (“then I must ...”). One kind of *hypothetical* imperatives is *technical* and governs our accomplishing of a chosen task (e.g., the building of the house). We don’t begin the construction of a house by hanging the roof in the air. It is necessary (imperative) that we first lay a foundation and raise the walls before we construct the roof. However, situation-based (hypothetical) imperatives are not limited to technical imperatives. A second kind of *hypothetical* imperatives is *pragmatic* and governs our pursuit of personal fulfillment (e.g., the pursuit of a specific career). If we want to be a lawyer, we wouldn’t go to medical school.

However, our autonomous, creative freedom, which consists of our ability to initiate a sequence of events that nature could never accomplish on its own, confronts us with a very different set of imperatives than those hypothetical imperatives that *arise out of our needs in a particular situation*. This set of imperatives that are grounded in our creative freedom, not the physical world, is called categorical imperatives. Like creative freedom itself, categorical imperatives must be self-imposed independently of hypothetical projects and pragmatic ends. The very character of a categorical imperative is that it is grounded in our autonomous, creative freedom and not driven by our situation.

Creative freedom and its categorical imperatives are the pinnacle not only of our own individual *a priori* synthetic judgment that *add to* and even *transform* the physical world, but they also constitute an extraordinary set of capacities that we are incapable of identifying anywhere else in our world. Our creative freedom is not driven by blind instinct but by consciously chosen ends, and it would be impossible for us to determine, but we have only the most rudimentary (if at all) indication from other species, whether or not it is possible for another species to self-legislate a moral principle to govern its actions.

Here we run smack into the debate over evolution and morality between Dawkins/Dennet and Midgely. Are moral principles the product of a “selfish gene” that is able to preserve itself by altruistic cooperation with other like-genes in a form of “bottom-up” evolutionary morality, as Dawkins/Dennet maintain? Or do moral principles, particularly altruism, require a social dimension that would constitute a form of “top-down” moral system driven by social interest? Critical Idealism suggests that neither option (“bottom-up” on the basis of genes alone or “top-down” on the basis of social interest) is sufficient to account for morality. In fact, Critical Idealism views neither of these options as actually morality since they are both grounded in *hypothetical necessity*.

Is Critical Idealism justified in claiming that there is *categorical necessity*? Critical Idealism readily acknowledges that we can neither prove nor disprove that human beings possess an extraordinary efficient causality that is inseparable from, but not reducible to, the efficient causality of nature. However, when it comes to causal explanations generally, there are no unequivocal proofs or disproofs. This does not mean that we deny that there are causes of experience either physical or transcendental. It only acknowledges that we are incapable of proving or disproving those causal explanations.

Why would we conclude that we did possess autonomous, creative freedom? If we deny that we do, then we reduce ourselves to blind automatons or marionettes. Creative freedom is one of those key indicators of the limits to reason, in this case practical reason. We can neither prove nor disprove that we are free, but the consequences of our denying our freedom would make us non-human. Here again, Critical Idealism identifies *necessities* in the midst of skepticism. For us to be the species that we experience ourselves to be, *it is necessary* that we assume our creative freedom.

This assumption of freedom, however, is no blind leap of faith. It is what Kant called the closest we can come to a “fact of pure reason.” A fact, of course, requires empirical proof, and we have just acknowledged that such a proof (or disproof) for freedom is impossible. However, our creative freedom is so crucial to our own self-understanding that it is *as if* it were an empirical fact. Ferdinand Christian Wolff’s and John Searle’s declaration of a monistic, efficient causality that is exclusively material is as much a speculative judgment as any theological speculation over divine causality. However, Critical Idealism embraces neither camp when it comes to causal explanations. It is our species that constructs causal explanations because we don’t have direct access to causes, and we construct causal explanations *critically* when we approach them without metaphysical dogmatism and in light of what is necessary in order for us to experience, know, and act as we do.

Categorical imperatives: Criteria for Moral Maxims

If we assume that we possess a supersensible efficient causality that is never separable from yet irreducible to the efficient causality of nature, then the lesson of dreams in contrast to being awake (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft* B 520-521, *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können* [Weischedel ed.]: 154, *Metaphysik Mrrongovius* [Weischedel ed.]: 927) is that efficient causality is governed by rules. Yet the rules that govern the efficient causality of freedom are not the deterministic, blind, mechanical laws of nature. Rather, freedom’s laws must be compatible with freedom: they must be self-legislated and not heteronomous (i.e., they cannot be imposed by any source, divine or natural, beyond or outside of the self). The individual does not have to create the moral principle. Moral principles can come from a variety of sources. Yet, just as no one but the individual can know whether or not s/he has consciously applied a moral principle to her/his action, no one but the individual can legislate a moral principle to govern her/his action. The social order, church, political system, and family can all attempt to legislate moral principles for the individual, but all that can be legislated are civic laws that govern external activities. More importantly, even such civic laws can be just (moral) only if the citizens who have placed themselves under a system of civic law hold themselves accountable to a higher moral law. In other words, one can do everything properly according to the civic law and still be unjust (immoral). Unlike the civic law where the appearance of justice is all that is necessary, the individual holds her-/himself accountable to not merely the appearance but also the reality of the moral law.

If there is no heteronomous list of moral principles to which the individual must necessarily conform, from where does the moral law get its absolute authority? From the individual! How does the individual go about determining that a principle is moral? By applying the three criteria of the Categorical Imperative (found in Section II of the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*)

and invoking the expectations of what Kant called the three maxims of the understanding (found in “§40 On Taste as a kind of *sensus communis* [\[1\]](#)” in the *Kritik der Urteilkraft*)!

The first criterion of the Categorical Imperative is: act on the basis of a principle that you would want to be universal *as if it were a law of nature*. Kant does not say that it can be proved to be universal as a law of nature is universal! If we had to wait until we proved that we will act on the basis of a universal moral principle, we could never act. However, we cannot not act, and our very action confronts us with the demand of a principle to govern that action. Action demands a wager of knowledge. Given the impossibility of a heteronomous moral order and the demand that our own actions require us to invoke principles to govern them, we can invoke the criterion of universality to check-mate our personal interest (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* [Cambridge], 40). Kant shared with Francis Hutcheson the central conviction that moral decisions have nothing to do with personal interest. Unlike Hutcheson, however, Kant does not anchor morality in consequences (Utilitarian criteria of outcomes for the greatest number) for which Hutcheson developed a utilitarian calculus already before Bentham. Rather, reining in interests have to do with acting on the basis of a moral principle *solely because it is right* and not because it is going to fulfill some personal interest (including interest in benefits to the greatest number). The universal law criterion of the Categorical Imperative is not a strategy that demands additional criteria (e.g., a utilitarian calculus) to establish the universality of one’s moral principle. What it involves is the neutralization of personal interest in the selection of moral principles. It is primarily a *negative criterion*, not a positive criterion.

The second criterion of the Categorical Imperative is positive: it asserts that we should treat ourselves and others as ends and never as mere means. The ground for this criterion is extensively developed in the *Grundlegung*. It is the very ground for morality itself: creative freedom. Human dignity (not worth, which is a category of value based on exchange) is grounded by the capacity of autonomous, creative freedom since freedom is as above commerce as it is above nature, is inviolable, and can never be lost as long as one lives. This criterion does not maintain that we cannot serve as a means for someone else or that someone else cannot serve as a means for our own ends. What it maintains is that we should in all situations never reduce ourselves or the other *to a mere means*. Hence, this form of the Categorical Imperative provides a positive criterion for the selection of the moral principle upon which the individual will act that leaves it up to the free individuals involved to work out the mutual accomplishment of ends.

The third criterion of the Categorical Imperative can be viewed as first in the order of significance. It maintains that whatever we do, we should acknowledge all other persons as creatively free agents, who also self-legislate moral maxims to govern their actions. In other words, moral principles cannot be legislated. Moral principles are above the civic law, they can only be self-legislated, and they are the ultimate standard to which even the civic law is held accountable. When combined with the second criterion of the Categorical Imperative, we have as strong a statement as can be made for human beings being ends in a kingdom of ends (i.e., a kingdom of moral principles).

In short, the *self-legislation* of moral principles *does not consist in the creation* of moral principles since they constitute the order of laws that govern the efficient causality of freedom. Moral principles constitute a system of ends that have the unique status of having to be

self-legislated. We can choose to ignore these systems of law that govern efficient causality, but just as with the laws of nature, so too with moral laws, we ignore the system of order at our own peril.

When combined with the three maxims of the understanding, the three criteria of the Categorical Imperative provide the individual with a moral orientation that in no way compromises her/his freedom. The three maxims are: 1) think for yourself; 2) think from the perspective of the other; and 3) be consistent with your highest capacities (i.e., with your personal dignity).

The maxim to think for yourself is not a cry to autonomous individualism! Rather, it constitutes the self-expectation to develop one's reflective judgment (i.e., to seek out concepts where one does not already possess one as would be the case with a determining judgment) on the basis of the recognition of the nature of *a priori* synthetic judgment that incessantly requires the individual to *add things to phenomena* in order to adequately understand them. Reflective judgment can never consist in mere memorization or mimicry. It requires that one take personal ownership of one's judgments in the context of the givenness of the phenomena, never independent of phenomena.

The maxim to think from the perspective of the other involves more than merely developing a sense of empathy for the other's situation. It includes, more importantly, the recognition that judgment invokes a *sensus communis*, a common process and activity of judging that emphasizes the *communal* nature of understanding. Again, this maxim is a dramatic check-mate to mere individual autonomy that in principle rejects society and tradition. Proper understanding of, and action in, the world requires a perspective of *totality* that is grounded in the assumption of universal capacities (e.g., of theoretical and practical reason) that all conscious/rational beings share.

Finally, Kant made clear in his *Vorlesung zur Moralphilosophie*(180) already in 1775 that the maxim of consistency is formulated in terms of humanity's extraordinary capacity of freedom in conformity with humanity as a kingdom of ends. In other words, the maxim does not mean that we should blindly hold onto a system of convictions merely because the system is consistent. Mere consistency can be consistently wrong as Habermas suggests with his notion of "systematic distortion." Rather, we should be consistent with our understanding of human dignity.

Kant's moral philosophy allows us to be human and does not expect the impossible (i.e., perfection) from us. He suggests that remorse has a constructive role to play in morality since it drives us to do better the next time (see *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* [Meiner Verlag ed.]: 113-115). What our freedom and self-legislation of moral principles mean, however, is that we come into this world with a set of capacities and inclinations that need to be exercised rather than their determining our nature and character from the get-go. The task of the community is to encourage and assist every individual in the exercising of her/his highest capacity of creativity and responsibility. Our inability to guarantee this process even under the conditions of mutual encouragement is what allows Kant to speak of a central role of religion in our becoming human. This aspect of Kant's work is what prohibits our reducing of his to a mere

“moral” philosophy. He called his work philosophical theology, which is a theme of another post.

An additional constitutive element is raised by the theme of perfection (or the unreasonableness of our realization of perfection). With the exception of the Kant’s moral theory, moral theories from Plato and Aristotle to Utilitarianism are concerned with consequences, not with acting on the basis of a moral principle merely because it is right and regardless of the consequences. The most succinct formulation of this revolution in moral theory is found in Section I of the *Grundlegung*. Practical reason focuses on that over which the individual has control; not on those things over which we have no control. All forms of consequentialist ethics require the possession of an omnipotence and omniscience that it is impossible for the individual to possess. We cannot control nor can we know all of the consequences of our actions that we would have to control and know in order to base our moral status on consequences. What we can control is the moral principle on which we choose to act. Kant calls this ability to act on the basis of a moral principle merely because it is right and not because its consequences will satisfy some interest: duty. It is obvious that this notion of “duty” is not that of an obligation to one’s country, to one’s employer, or even to one’s family. These latter notions of duty are entirely heteronomous and are driven by self-interest. They have nothing to do with Kant’s notion of autonomous duty grounded in our creative freedom. Duty for practical reason is established by the individual’s silent, internal wrestling with the moral principles s/he selects to guide one’s action. In other words, contrary to heteronomous duty, no one but the individual can know whether or not s/he has “done her/his duty.”

Kant places duty above happiness. That by no means suggests that the moral life is grim and depressive. On the contrary, there is no experience of satisfaction comparable to the realization that one has acted on the basis of a moral principle merely because it is right – and not because it is going to satisfy one’s interest, even the interest of happiness. However, the motivation for morality is not even this satisfaction. We can only experience this satisfaction if we have first acted on the basis of proper duty. Having acted out of duty, then, makes one *worthy* of whatever satisfaction/happiness one might experience as a consequence of acting out of duty. Once again, what matters in practical reason is not the consequences but the exercising of one’s moral capacity. An investigation of Kant’s *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (*Religion within the Boundaries of mere Reason*) will demonstrate further the importance of moral effort over any and every kind of divine assistance without denying the possibility of such assistance.

[1] Kant is invoking the term „sensus communis“ here in the Aristotelian sense formulated in “On Sense and the Sensible” as capacity of sense that unites the five senses. He is not talking about “common sense” as we normally mean it (i.e., as a intuitively shared understanding of how to do things).