

Autonomy of Will : A Kantian Approach

Hasen Ali Ahmed

*Ph. D. Research Scholar, Deptt. of Philosophy
University of North Bengal, Raja Rammohunpur
Dist- Darjeeling (W. B.), 734013*

ABSTRACT

Autonomy of the will is the hallmark of morality and Kant held the supreme position as far as autonomy of the will of moral agent is concerned. According to Kant, to inquire the worth of morality would be futile if the moral agent does not enjoy the autonomy of the will. In this sense, the foundation of morality actually rests on the autonomy of the will of the moral agent. Autonomy of will means the freedom of the will of the individual or moral agent. The moral agent must be free. Otherwise, his action would be vitiated by external factors, what may be termed as 'moral luck', according to Nagel. The moral agent must be pure in thought. He is guided by moral imperative what has been termed as 'categorical imperative' by Kant. According to Kant, categorical imperative is an unconditional urge arising from within. It is purely guided by practical reason. As categorical imperative is unconditional, it must be universalizable as well. Since moral rules are guided by categorical imperative, moral rules are universalizable in nature. Kant thus offered us a deontological approach of morality where an action is performed by a moral agent not as a 'means to an end, but as an end in itself'. To act as an end in itself means to act as 'duty for duty sake'. This cannot be done by a moral agent if he is not a responsible moral agent. Thus, autonomy of the will or freedom of the will is deeply associated with the responsibility of the moral agent. Many would say that freedom and responsibility are polar concepts. Kant does not think so. For Kant, autonomy of the will is coherent with the responsibility of the moral agent. A moral agent cannot be autonomous in Kantian moral perspective if he is no longer a responsible moral agent. Thus, the development of a moral agent is bestowed in his own identity and autonomy. A moral agent by virtue of being a moral agent must be autonomous. He equally enjoys identity. Autonomy and identity ensures the development of moral agent. In such a case he will follow the rules which are universalizable in nature. For Kant, a moral agent must act on the basis of the conformity of rules. He then says, act only with the maxim so that it will become a universal law. Universalizability is the hallmark of morality. It states whatever is good to you in a particular situation; it would remain good to every other in the same situation without exception. This cannot be happened if moral principle would be circumstantial and evoked in situation. This is where the sanctity of the autonomy of the will of moral agent actually hinges on. The main objective of this paper is to exemplify how the trio-concepts autonomy, identity and development can be comprehended within the horizon of Kantian concept 'autonomy of the will'.

Key words: *Autonomy, development, identity, universalizability, will.*

Reference to this paper
should be made as
follows:

Hasen Ali Ahmed,

*Autonomy of Will : A
Kantian Approach,*

RJPSSs 2017, Vol. 43,
No.2, Article No. 18
pp.136-142,(RJ1934)

Online available at :
[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=2012](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=2012)

Identity, autonomy and development are entwined terms in the sense that one can be comprehended with regard to the other. Where there is identity crisis, there is the crisis of autonomy. And where there is the crisis of autonomy there is the crisis of development. Having said this, it should be kept in mind that the concepts of autonomy and identity have their various implications. People are talking of moral identity and autonomy, political identity and autonomy, economical identity and autonomy, social and cultural identity and autonomy and so and so forth. Therefore, it would be prerequisite at the very outset to make it clear what sort of identity, autonomy we are ascribing for. This paper is primarily concerned about the ***autonomy of will of the moral agent*** as developed by Kant in his *Groundwork of the metaphysics of Morals*.¹ Kant says that the main objective of this book is to search for the establishment of the supreme principle of morality. He called the supreme principle of morality as the *categorical imperative*. Kant was a proponent of deontological ethics. According to Kant, the hallmark of morality actually hinges on the autonomy of the will of the moral agent. The moral action of a moral agent does not bear any moral worth if the agent does not enjoy autonomy of the will. Even though Kant does not find any scope of morality within the sphere of *Critique of Pure Reason*, but in his *Practical Reason*, Kant finds relevance of ethics and morality.

Being a leading campaigner of deontological approach of morality, Kant inclines to say that moral rules and principles are universalizable in nature. Like Kant, Hare also talked in favor of moral universalizability. As a result of that moral principles are thought of rigid and stringent in the absolute sense. In this regard, Kant brings the concept of *goodwill*. According to Kant, goodwill alone is good, nothing except goodwill is good. He said, "It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except goodwill."² Only goodwill alone is unconditional good and nothing other than goodwill can be good unconditionally. We think that the term *unconditional* must be taken care of as far as our understanding of the concept of identity and autonomy is concerned. By attributing goodwill as unconditional good, Kant actually rules out all external factors from the domain of morality. He says very straightforwardly that there is no exception in morality. Morality is guided by unconditional moral rules and principles. In morality there is no relevance of emotion, feeling, love, care, compassion, self-interest, etc. Moral rules and principles are guided by reason. A moral agent in Kantian ethics always enjoys an unbiased moral command arising out of within what Kant termed as *Categorical Imperatives*. Here Kant distinguishes between categorical imperative and hypothetical imperative. Hypothetical imperative is

conditional whereas categorical imperative is unconditional. With this perception Kant again finds the distinction between *act as a means to an end* and *act as an end in itself*. An act that is being performed as a *means to an end* would fall under the purview of hypothetical imperative. Such type of act does not have any moral worth. On the contrary, an act that is being performed 'not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself' falls under the sphere of categorical imperative. It is unconditional act. Since moral actions, according to Kant, are unconditional, they are guided by categorical imperative. However, the concept of categorical imperative does not bear any sense if the moral agent does not enjoy the autonomy of the will. A moral action is involved to perform act because of the will comes from within. Categorical imperative is moral urge or moral obligation comes from within. Accordingly, a moral agent acts out of the moral dictum what Kant termed as 'duty for duty sake'.

It thus seems to us that the deontological ethics of Kant is predominantly concerned with the autonomy of the will of the moral agent. The autonomy of the will of the moral agent equally establishes the identity of the moral agent. Every moral agent reserves his own identity because as a moral agent he enjoys autonomy of the will. Thus, there is no question of doubt that Kantian autonomy of the will of the moral agent equally links with the identity of the moral agent. The concept of identity does not bear any sense in the real sense of the term if it is not linked with the very idea of autonomy. Even one may conceive 'autonomy of the will' with regard to 'freedom of the will' of the individual. A will of the moral agent is autonomous leads us to assume that the moral agent enjoys 'freedom of the will'. Many would say that moral freedom or moral autonomy is entangled with moral responsibility. Thus, it would perhaps wrong to assume that freedom and responsibility are contrary with each other. A moral agent even if he is autonomous and enjoys freedom of the will, must be a responsible agent. He is responsible towards his own action. Moral responsibility leads towards moral development. The term 'moral responsibility' does not bear any sense without *moral commitment*. Moral commitment and moral responsibility ensures moral development. This clearly suggests how the key concepts, such as, autonomy, identity, and development are entwined with each other.

Being a deontologist, Kant looks the intrinsic aspect of morality. He completely forfeits the external aspects of morality. For Kant, morality is all about of internal or intrinsic cultivation or practice. The moral agent is completely guided by reason or will while performing action. From moral perspective, an urge or will is being developed within the moral agent what Kant termed as '**Categorical Imperative**'. In this regard, Kant says, "The categorical imperative, which declares the action to be of

itself objectively necessary without reference to some purpose, that is, even apart from any other end, holds as an apodictically practical principle”.³ Even Kant elsewhere conceives as *an a priori synthetic practical proposition*.⁴ Categorical imperative is pure, unconditional and universalizable in nature. It helps the moral agent to perform *duty as duty sake* by following the rules of duty. Here the moral agent is completely guided by his internal *moral dictation*. As the moral dictation is his own intrinsic internal command, he enjoys the autonomy of the will, freedom of the will. By way of doing it, he **develops himself**. He gradually becomes *the members of the kingdom of ends*. Categorical imperative contains unconditional universal law. Accordingly, it can be said after Kant that there remains only a single categorical imperative which states “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law”.⁵ Accordingly, Kant equally sets forth the universal imperative of duty by saying “act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature”.⁶ Since a moral agent in Kantian deontology enjoys autonomy and freedom of the will, it can generally be assumed that all rational moral agents always to apprise their actions in accordance with the maxims as universal laws.

Kant further contends that every rational being exists *as an end in itself*, not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion, he must in all his actions always be regarded as the same time *as an end*. This so happens because there is to be a **supreme practical principle** functioning as categorical imperative that can serve as a universal practical law⁷. Kant conceives it as *objective principle of morality* which adequately ensures that rational nature exists as an end in itself. Thus, Kant conceived categorical imperative as *practical imperative* based on the principle: *So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means*. It gives an important insight. We think that Kantian understanding of categorical imperative as practical imperative not only ensures the autonomy of the will of the moral agent, it equally ensures the autonomy of the will of every moral agent. As moral principles are universal in nature, ensuring the autonomy of the will of any moral agent will ensure the autonomy of the will of every other. To treat every other as an end in itself will ensure and preserve the autonomy of the will of every other as well. Alternatively, it can be said that to treat every other *as a means to an end* is to dictate them, to control them. To dictate or control other is to rob their autonomy in every respect. Kant however does not give importance on external or physical autonomy of the will, rather he talks in favour of internal or will based

autonomy. The right to cast a vote reflects one's autonomy; likewise the right to speak would equally reflect autonomy. Kantian understanding of moral autonomy of the will of the individual has a different implication altogether. When he speaks of the autonomy of the will of the moral agent, he tries to make it pure in the absolute sense of the term.

Thus the will of every human ensures *a will giving universal law* through maxims. Universal law is not based on any interest and hence be unconditional. The ultimate objective of universal law is to enlighten moral agents as the *members of a kingdom of ends*. By the term *kingdom*, Kant means *a system of union* of various rational beings through common moral laws. A system of union among rational agents is conceivable for Kant because here each of moral agents is being treated *never merely as means but always at the same time as end in themselves*. Kingdom of ends is conceivable because of common objective and universal moral laws. Here a moral agent enjoys sovereign as lawmaking. As a result of that, he is not subject to the will of any other. Kant further contends that in the kingdom of ends everything has either *a price or a dignity*. He conceives *dignity* as an inner unconditional, incomparable worth of a moral agent. Thus for Kant, "autonomy is therefore the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature."⁸ But how does kingdom of ends in the Kantian sense possible? In this regard it can be said that the kingdom of ends is possible because here every moral agent at the same time acts under the proviso of a universal law. Indeed it is the universal law that marks him out as an end in itself. Here every moral agent acts as a law giving agent. A kingdom of ends is thus possible only by analogy with a kingdom of nature. Here every moral action performed by moral agent must coexist with the autonomy of the will is permitted. In this regard, Kant finds the distinction between 'good will' and 'holy will'. He then says that a will whose maxims necessarily harmonize with the law of autonomy is a holy will. Holy will is the same as absolutely good will. A will that is not absolutely good is *obligation*. The objective necessity of an action from obligation is called duty.

Concluding remarks

It thus seems to us that Kantian autonomy of the will *is the property of the will*. It is the hallmark of morality. The principle of autonomy is to choose only in such a way that the maxims of your choice are also included as universal law in the same volition. According to Kant, moral laws represent certain *sublimity and dignity* in the person who fulfills all his duties. In a sense the moral dignity of humanity consists just in his capacity to give universal law. Autonomy of the will is the sole or

supreme principle of morality. Human reason in its pure use tries all possible wrong ways before it succeeds in finding the only true way. A moral agent always enjoys freedom. In fact, the concept of freedom is the key to the explanation of the autonomy of the will. A moral agent can identify himself as free and autonomous within the paradigm of morality echoed by Kant. The moral inward development of a man is made possible with the help of freedom and autonomy of the will of the moral agent. Kant thus conceives moral law as binding to the moral agent. It is not an external binding or binding arising out of external factors, rather it is supposed to be the internal binding or imperative developed and coming from within. It is the product of the practical reason of the moral agent. It is a reflective account of human being through which he finds in himself a capacity by which he distinguishes himself from all other beings and at times even from himself. This reflective account is made possible because of reason. Just as the law of nature is the ground of all appearance, the universal principle of morality which ensures the identity, autonomy and freedom of the moral agent, is the ground of all actions of rational beings. The categorical imperatives, thus for Kant, is made possible because *the idea of freedom makes me a member of an intelligible world*. As a result of that moral actions are always in conformity with the autonomy of the will. In such a situation a moral agent finds himself as a member of the world of sense. Thus, in Kantian sense, one may conceive categorical imperative in the sense of *categorical ought* and this categorical “ought” represents a synthetic proposition a priori on which all cognition of the nature rests. The moral ‘ought’ is his necessary will as a member of the kingdom of ends. The freedom of the will of intelligence entails his autonomy as a necessary consequence. Putting everything into perspective we may end up this paper with the insight that the autonomy of the will of the moral agent developed by Kant on the basis of the background of practical reason ensures an overall development of man where the identity, freedom is fully restored. A moral agent acquiring these moral virtues would eventually become the member of the kingdom of ends. It would be a moral stage where he will reveal everything with the perception of ‘self-love’.

References:

(Endnotes)

¹ Kant, Immanuel,

Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,

translated and edited by Mary Gregor, Cambridge University Press, 1977

² Ibid., p.7.

³ Ibid.

,

p.26.

⁴ Ibid., p.30.

⁵ Ibid., p.31.

⁶ Ibid., p.31.

⁷ See Kant,

The Metaphysics of Morals,

6.223.

⁸ Ibid., 4:436, p.43.