

A PSYCHOPHILOSOPHICAL INTERFACE CONCERNING THE 'VOICE OF CONSCIENCE' IN THE LIGHT OF KANT AND FREUD

Urmi Ray¹, Suddhendu Chakraborty²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Women's Christian College, Kolkata.

²Senior Research Medical Officer, Department of Psychiatry, KPC Medical College, Kolkata.

ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND

We are different from other animals not only on grounds of rationality, but also because we possess an 'inner voice' (Viveka) enabling us to discriminate between good/bad, right/wrong. This voice is present in all; surprisingly whose form, matter and degree of determination are more or less the same in all. For Kant, this Voice of Conscience was perhaps the Categorical Imperative. For Sigmund Freud, the notion of 'Super Ego' or 'Ego Ideal' represented the Voice of Conscience. However, we notice a striking similarity between Kant's Moral law or the Categorical Imperative and Freud's super-ego for both seem to represent the Voice of Conscience, dictating us what we should or should not do. My aim in this paper is to first explore the nature and intensity of such a similarity. It would also try to draw the reader's attention to the fact that 'Morality' is something that is present within us, it is our nature; thus to go against our nature and thereby act immorally would only lead to destruction and devastation in the society.

KEYWORDS

Voice of Conscience, Super-Ego, Categorical Imperative.

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BACKGROUND

What do we mean by the 'Voice of Conscience?' Various thoughts constantly go in our minds - some being murmured, others loud and clear - as we are thinking beings. We are never found without thoughts, except perhaps when we are in deep, dreamless, sleep (sushupti). Now some of our thoughts are put into words and sentences to be heard by the thinker himself (paraphrased in his own voice). But do 'all' these thoughts represent our voice of Conscience? No, certainly not. Those thoughts which prevent us from doing a particular action, which we believe to be not right would be referred as our voice of conscience. This shows that our ordinary, practical thought does not contain any distinctive moral sense of 'Ought' that lends moral content to some of our practical conclusions.

CONTENT

The voice of conscience then is this voice of authority, which dictates the "do's" and "dont's" of our lives. It carries a different degree or kind of authority from the ordinary 'ought' or 'ought not' to do. Some philosophers believe that the fundamental feature of morality is given by the voice of conscience. By reflection on how it sounds, one can deduce what it says. Psychologists further state that if the voice of conscience does not represent a distinctive authority that accompanies some practical conclusions, then it is more than a curiosity of moral psychology.

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Corresponding Author:

Dr. Suddhendu Chakraborty,

30B, Second Road,

East End Park, Kalikapur,

Kolkata-700099.

E-mail: dr.suddhendu.chakraborty@gmail.com



Thus anything put to question, whether moral or not, can be answered at once if the same question is asked to the voice of conscience. This, indeed fulfils our moral requirements. Immanuel Kant's 'Moral Law' seems to be a corollary of this voice of conscience. The 'Strict' notion of 'Categorical Imperative.' (An order, unaffected by any condition) can only be obtained by none other than our voice of conscience. Since both share the same nature, we are tempted to infer that Categorical Imperative is the representative of the voice of conscience. Of course, Kant did not formulate his moral theory on these lines; but the terms like 'duty' and 'moral law,' that Kant uses in his moral theory may be taken as substitutes of this voice of conscience.

Now let us consider Kant's Moral Law and see how he formulates it. Kant has expressed his 'Moral Law' in three different formulation. They are -

First Formula

Formula of Universal Law

"Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you at the same time can will that it become a universal law."¹

Second Formula

Formula of Humanity as End in Itself. "So act that your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means."²

Third Formula

Formula of Autonomy - "...the idea of the will of every rational being as a will giving universal law."³

The establishment of the moral principle by Kant actually relates to only one of its formulation of autonomy. His search results in formulating the principle in three ways.

Kant proposes to derive the above three formulae from the concept of a Categorical Imperative - which he argues is the form all properly moral principles must take.

Kant's theory of will takes us to be self-directing agents as we have the capacity to step back from our natural desires, reflect on them, consider whether and how we should satisfy them to be moved by them only on the basis of such reflections. An inclination (Habitual, empirical desire - such as hunger) moves us to act when we choose to set its object as an end for ourselves. If we see an apple and desire to eat it then eating it would be our end, where climbing up the tree or reaching for the apple with a stick would be our means. Setting an end thus commands us to perform the action required as a means to the end. Kant calls this principle a "hypothetical imperative." It is an "imperative," because it is a command of reason requiring the agent to do something; it is "hypothetical" because the command governs our action only on the condition that we "will" the end in question.

In contrast, an imperative that has no such condition would be called a 'Categorical Imperative.' Categorical imperatives are categorical, because their validity is not conditioned by some prior end. "If you make a promise, keep it" may be a "hypothetical imperative" in grammatical sense but not to Kant, because the "if" clause does not refer to an end that conditions the validity of the imperative. A moral imperative is categorical, because its function is not to advise us how to reach some prior end of ours that is based on what we happen to want, but instead to command us how to act irrespective of our wants or our contingent ends. The supreme principle of morality admits no conditions or exceptions, because there is nothing higher by reference to which conditions or exceptions could be justified. But who can dictate such neutral principle devoid of any external influence other than our conscience? At this stage, it seems that Kant's notion of Categorical Imperative is the representative of our voice of conscience. Both give us a universal law. For example promise-keeping - I perform this act not because 'I have to pursue some end, thus using it as a means;' this is not the case with the Categorical Imperative or with our voice of conscience. Conscience too, is also not conditioned by some prior end. It is neutral, free from analysis of actions, which are good in themselves. Promise-keeping has intrinsic goodness in it, it is good not because it would benefit me in the long run or portray me as a trustworthy person, but good because it is so, that is for its own sake. And such an unconditional goodness can only come from our conscience. Conscience is something which gives us the best, not because it is the best possible option only for me, but because it is a rule. It is true that promise keeping is good because it is good in itself and not because it sustains human worth or dignity - but in the process of performing such goodness our wellbeing is automatically taken care of. But the question still remains that, does such goodness really give justice to all? If by telling truth the life of some innocent who takes shelter under a strict truth teller get destroyed, then does such Categorical Imperative or voice of conscience - actually bring any kind of morality? Kant talks of a secondary moral principle, which unlike Categorical Imperative considers situations and circumstances. For instance, in the principle that we should tell the truth there may be implied conditions that would release us from a truth and under those conditions there is no categorical imperative to sustain the truth. It is therefore an elementary misunderstanding to think that Kantian Ethics is committed to a system of

inflexible moral rules just because it regards moral imperatives as categorical imperatives.⁴

Further, we see that Kant says promise keeping does not need any End to validate such an action (as it can be validated by its own worth) - but this does not mean that such an act would not have any end. In other words promise keeping also has an end, but that end does not aim to justify or validate the worth of promise keeping. Every action ought to produce some consequence. Thus, promise keeping would also produce some consequence or end. We should not be misguided into thinking that our conscience dictates us principles of morality, which would never bring our good but would only maintain the intrinsic worth of those principles. Enacting those principles some good consequences would be spontaneously produced as by-products of actions. Kant also agreed that every action (even those based on Categorical Imperative) would have an end or consequence. Hence, the fact that Categorical Imperatives have no prior end does not mean that the actions obeying them have no end. In fact Kant states that the 'End,' which Categorical Imperatives provide - are duties. Duties, according to him, are dictated by our goodwill. Now goodwill is that unconditional goodness by virtue of which the Categorical Imperative achieve an unconditioned status (i.e. a status which requires no condition for providing its truth). There are many 'goods' in our world. For example, food, education, wealth, so on. But each of these are conditioned. In other words, food is good only 'if' we take it in proper amount (not too less not too more); again education is good 'until' it acquires pride; money is good 'if' and only 'if' earned honestly and utilised for right purposes. Thus, all these above mentioned 'goods' are conditional, but 'good will' is good not because of 'this' or 'that' purpose, but good in itself. Similarly, conscience is also unconditionally good as it is a product of pure reason. Here, again similarity is noticed between unconditional moral law of Kant (Categorical Imperative) and the unconditional conscience found within us.

In order to check whether a moral law would be a Categorical Imperative, we need to see whether by breaking it we get any contradiction.

Promise-keeping if violated will lead to promise-breaking, which indeed is contradictory to the main premise. Moreover if taken on an individual plane as well as collective plane - conjoining the two we get: I must break the promise · all must break the promise. Such a conjunction cannot be true as its conjunct - 'all must break promise' - is false. 'False' because if all start breaking promises - then the notion of 'promise' would disappear from earth. A similar technique as shown by Kant can be used to check whether the voices heard from within us are dictated by our conscience or not. Our conscience can never dictate notions, which would lead to contradiction or would frustrate the concept itself. Somehow from the aims and purposes of Kant's Categorical Imperative and those of voices of our conscience, a similarity can be drawn between the two.

Now, we would observe how universalisation of Kant's first formulation of Categorical Imperative works.

The basic idea of Kant's Categorical Imperative is that it is a command stating 'Thou' or 'You' are not allowed to do anything yourself that you would not be willing to allow everyone else to do as well 'Thou' or 'Your' shall not make exceptions for yourself. 'Thou' shall not lie not only means

that 'you' as one particular individual shall not lie, but it actually means that no individual should lie. 'Thou shall not lie' is presented to us by social constructs and society's standards of morality, which is internalised by individuals as 'I shall not lie.'

Here, our conscience plays a role. It goes on to dictate such a social and moral rule to us (thus Kant says that Categorical Imperative is given to us by us - i.e. given by our conscience to us as taken from the society) - where internalisation takes place on the basis of our reverence towards such a rule. Such a Categorical Imperative has both an external feature and an internal feature. Kant states that it is inescapably present in us; again at other times he says we give it to us. Giving it here indicates its external binding. That is it means it was there outside and we go on to internalise it. It was formed by the society as per its norms and functions and our conscience points out to us and dictates to us that "You, being a part of the society should also not do this" and as we believe our conscience to be the best judge of ours we internalise it as a maxim stating - "I shall not lie" and when every individual does so listening and revering their conscience the maxim then automatically becomes universalised as, "No one shall lie." This conscience which imbibes such a moral law within us (where while breaking it also we feel guilty) is nothing, but a Categorical Imperative of the Pure Reason. Thus, Conscience and Categorical Imperative seem to be similar.

Now, let us consider a concrete instance and observe how the process of universalisation works.⁵

A person finds himself driven to borrowing money because of his need, where he knows that he is under no such circumstances where he can clear his loan. But he also knows that he has to lie in order to get the money and thus he assures the lender to repay it back to him. Now can this be a rule, i.e. how would it be if everyone did so - the answer would tell us whether such an act is ethical or not. The maxim in this case would be such - 'Whenever I believe myself short of money, I will borrow money and promise to pay it back, though I know this will never be done.' For any future welfare, this maxim would work well, but 'Is it right?' In order to get the answer let us see how would things stand if this maxim became a universal law? If everyone starts taking money from the others by assuring them to repay the loan but actually never repaid it - then no one would give loan to any other; as no one would trust the other anymore. As on universalising such a maxim, it is found that no fruitful results are obtained, rather distrust is built amongst individuals - hence the above instance cannot stand as a universal maxim. And previously we mentioned that if an action cannot be universalised, then (for Kant) it cannot be ethical too.

Thus, the target of universalisation is same as scrutinising it, whether ethical or not.

So the maxim as produced by our society was 'You shall not lie' and it has to be remembered that the maxim or Categorical Imperative which Kant talks about is framed, not in the second or third person, but framed in the first person. A third personal thought such as 'Immanuel Kant will not lie' - would not be a maxim of action, as it could not be acted upon by the thinker until he reformulated it reflexively in the first person.

The first-personal thought should at once remind us of the second-personal injunction - "Thou shall not lie" - which

was there regarded as being addressed by the agent to himself. So, 'Thou shall not lie' might be called the reflexive second person - the second person as talking to one self. And when it is thus addressed to one self, 'Thou shall not lie,' i.e. just the contradictory of 'I shall lie,' the maxim is thus currently up for universalisation.

This is how 'I shall not lie' becomes 'No one shall lie.' This is how a particular instance becomes a Universal 'Law' and this is how universalisation works.

The Authority of Moral Law

The moral law is authoritative not only because it is Universal, but also because it is necessary and a priori. Thus, Kant's concept of morality entails in it necessity, universality and a priority. To show this let us point out two passages from the 'Ground Work.' Kant states in this context.

Everyone must admit that a law, if it is to hold morally - that is as the ground of an obligation - must carry with it absolute necessity; that the command 'Thou shall not lie' does not hold for men without other rational beings having to heed it and similarly with all other genuine moral laws; and that consequently the ground of obligation here must be sought not in the nature of man or in the circumstances of the world where he is located, but solely a priori in the concepts of pure reason.⁶

It may be added that unless we wish to deny the concept of morality all truth and all relation to a possible object we cannot dispute that its law is of such widespread significance as to hold, not merely for men, but for all rational beings as such not merely subject to contingent conditions and exceptions, but with absolute necessity. And how could laws for determining our will be taken as laws for determining the will of a rational being as such - and only because of this determining ours - if these laws were merely empirical and did not have their source completely a priori in pure, but practical reason?⁷

These passages are central to the Groundwork as they introduce the conceptual connection among morality, universality and the apriority through which Kant attracts the content of Categorical Imperative from the very notion of morality.

The passages contend that the concept of morality entails that its laws carry 'absolute necessity'; which entails that they hold not only for men but for all rational creatures; which entails that they hold a priori - as the concept of 'all' can be only grasped by reason and not by experience - and such a connection of universality, necessity and a priority - are also strewned together as found in our voice of conscience. Once again this shows that the authority which moral law (in Kant) acquires is thus obtained from our conscience. Hence, Categorical Imperative represents our conscience.

'Conscience' is autonomous, produces Universal laws (that shows us what we should/should not do) and also preserves human dignity. These features clearly show the striking resemblance between conscience and Kant's Categorical Imperative.

What does our conscience give us - a 'form,' a 'matter' and a 'strong determination' when it states for example - 'you must not hurt others.' Such a form internalises within us and obstructs us from doing otherwise under such circumstances. Such a repeated obstruction felt from within develops a determination not to hurt others and hence forming a moral

rule. Kant too says the same thing when he contends that the first formula of his moral law gives 'form,' the second 'matter' and the third 'determination.'

In VE 2: 354 (*Vorlesungen über Metaphysik*), Kant states the inner judicial proceeding of conscience may be apathy compared with an external court of law, where there is an accused who gets punished by the inner law (dictate of Conscience/Categorical Imperative) an advocate namely love of self who at times excuses the accused and lastly a judge who either acquits or condemns us.

At this juncture, I would like to compare Kant's concept of the Categorical Imperative with Freud's notion of the Super Ego and show that both can be considered as representations of the voice of conscience. In Freud's notion of ID, ego and super-ego the ID is the accused, the Ego is the self-love and the super-ego is the judge.

While discussing the new model of mind, Freud discusses the mental apparatus in terms of the three agencies - Ego, ID and Super-Ego. The ID is defined as the oldest part of the mind from which the other structures are derived. ID contains everything that is inherited, that is present at birth, that is laid down in the constitution. The ID is primitive, unorganised and emotional, the realm of the illogical. The ID uses primary process, which employs the mechanisms of condensation, displacement, symbolisation and hallucinatory wish fulfilment. It ignores categories of time and space and treats contraries like dark/light or high/deep, as if they were identical. As indicated in Freud's description, ID is governed by the primitive principle of mental dynamics; avoidance of 'unpleasure' which can only be achieved by satisfaction or instinctual needs accompanied by pleasure.⁸ Thus 'ID' is guided by the pleasure principle.

The Ego is that part of the mind, which represents consciousness. It employs secondary process: that is reason, common sense and the power to delay immediate responses to external stimuli or the internal instinctive promptings. This ego is a bodily Ego as it originates from sensations springing from the surface of the body. The sense of 'I' depends upon the perception of one's own body as a separate entity. Once in existence, the Ego acts as an intermediary between the ID and the external world, because of the mental link between secondary perception and motor activity the ego controls voluntary movement. The prime function of the Ego is self-preservation.⁹ The ego is governed by the reality principle.

Freud's Third Division of Mind is described by him as follows

The long period of childhood during which the growing human being lives in dependence on his parents, leaves behind it as a precipitate, the formation in his Ego of a special agency in which this parental influence is prolonged. It has received the name super-ego. In so far as this super-ego is differentiated from the ego or is opposed to it, it constitutes a third power which the ego must take into account.¹⁰

Freud, though as the child develops his primary narcissism (love for self) is eclipsed, as he gradually acquires cultural and ethical ideas. Because of this split within the psyche, the child comes to realise that he can no longer idealise himself, that there is an ego-ideal with which his ego must conform.

Freud postulates an agency within the mind that develops itself to self-observation: which watches the ego and decides whether or not the ego conforming to or falls short of 'the ego-ideal.' This agency is what Freud later names the super-ego. It is originally derived from parental prohibitions and criticisms. Because of the long period of child-hood dependency, parental standards subsequently the standards of society become introjected; that is incorporated as part of the subject's own psyche with the consequence that the 'voice of conscience' is heard whenever the ego falls short of the ego - ideal.

Anthony Storr, a scholar on Freud in his book called *Freud: A very short Introduction* (p.63) says that Freud might equally well have used Pavlovian terminology. The super-ego can be regarded as the product of repeated conditioning by parental injunctions and criticism.

However, the notion of reducing the Moral laws of Kant's theory to the Voice of conscience was initiated by Freud. Freud uses this medium of voice of conscience as a means of parental discipline. By this he means that the voice of conscience, which discriminates between what we should do and what we should not get influenced by or takes shape of our parental trainings imparted to us during our childhood. This is what exactly Freud says even during super-ego construction. According to him such a voice is also responsible for controlling the Oedipus Complex, as it teaches us the social and moral codes of conduct.

Thus, Moral law or Super-ego, both are as strict as parents used to be when we were small. Freud goes on to state that such a voice of conscience or super ego is not only a product of parental discipline, but also that of parental excellences which the child once admired and wanted to imbibe when small. Such views in respect to super-ego and ego-ideal of Freud is clearly summarised in Joseph Sandler, Alex Holder and Dale Meers, *The Ego Ideal and the Ideal Self* (18) and in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*. (139 - 158).

Like the universal maxim of Categorical Imperative and Super-ego, conscience too tells us that the reasons we have for doing something may not be reasons for doing it. But the question remains that, is not the conscience supposed to forbid us from doing things, rather than merely inform us that we do not have reasons for doing them? Both Kant and Freud would retort perhaps that by informing us the absence of reasons for doing things, conscience rules out the possibility of doing them for reasons and with it the possibility of our doing them autonomously; since we are truly the agents of things we do only when we do them for reasons.

Thus both for Freud and Kant, morality is a virtue found 'within us.' By nature then we are moral and so if we go against it then we land up in many difficulties.

Both Kant and Freud agree that we have an innate admiration for the voice of conscience - which spontaneously capacitates us to accommodate it while enacting. Thus after studying Freud and Kant,¹⁰ we may conclude that we are rationally autonomous, i.e. we do not depend on anyone or anything else (apart from our own reason) in order to know whether our action is right or wrong. This brings reverence not only for mere ideas in us, but also reverence for 'the mere dignity of humanity' which is our response to something that we have internalised from real people, during our moral development.

Freud describes the ego as the seat of “reason and good sense.”¹¹ But the ego should be provided with standards of rationality before exercising such reason and good sense, Kant would say that these would be provided by the ‘goodwill.’ Freud adds here that these would be provided to the child’s ego by the good will of parents, whose love does not merely project a superficial glow on to them, but also registers genuine value of their reason and unconditional good sense - what Kant would call their rational nature. When the child internalises the ego-ideal that is when he grows up in the image of his loving parents, he internalises the Categorical Imperative - which is a description of the capacity to take persons as Ends.

CONCLUSION

I would like to end this discussion by quoting J. David Vellemen, who in *Self to Self* (p. 155) writes – “So perhaps the Superego really can be the Categorical Imperative. All that would be required for a true marriage for Freudian and Kantian moral theory is this: On Freud’s side, that the ideals incorporated into the super-ego include an ideal of practical reason and on Kant’s side that the Categorical Imperative which is an ideal of practical reason take the form of an Ego ideal.”

In this context, I would like to mention that in the Gita Lord Krishna plays the role of Super-Ego or the Voice of Conscience who resolves the moral dilemma of Arjuna helping him to determine his duty. Such a voice of conscience which Krishna represents acts as a moral universal maxim, determining one’s duty. This may be termed as ‘Categorical Imperative’ in Kant’s language. Prof. B. K. Matilal in his article, ‘Arjuna’s Moral Dilemma’ once mentioned that Sri Krishna did not say something new to Arjuna, he just reminded him what Arjuna had forgotten. In other words Krishna did not implant a ‘Bodha’ on Arjuna, but tried to instil in him a

‘Pratibodha’ or self-reflection. And this exactly is what Freud’s Super-Ego and Kant’s Categorical Imperative do.

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