

CHAPTER III

The Concept of 'Synthetic a Priori' in the Second Critique

The Critique of Pure Reason and the Critique of Practical Reason have important similarities. The business of a philosopher in both the 'critiques' is the same. In the first 'critique' Kant has taken 'for granted our ordinary knowledge of objects and our scientific knowledge'¹. The business of a philosopher is not to substitute a new type of science but simply to isolate and exhibit the a priori elements involved in our theoretical knowledge of objects. In the second 'critique' Kant is concerned not with theoretical knowledge but with moral knowledge, which is concerned not with what is but with what ought to be. Here also the function of a philosopher, according to Kant, is not to substitute a new system of morality but

to discover "the a priori principles according to which we judge when we make moral judgments"².

Again, both the 'critiques' deal with 'Reason'. But in spite of these similarities, it is not difficult to guess from the title alone of the second 'critique' that it is different from the first one in an important way. Though in both the 'critiques' Kant is concerned with 'Reason', a faculty of mind, the two 'critiques' deal with a different aspect or function of it — the first 'critique' with the theoretical function or use and the second with the practical function or use of reason. In its theoretical function reason determines the object given in intuition. 'It applied itself, as it were, to a datum given from another source than reason itself. In its practical function, however, reason is the source of its object; it is concerned with moral choice, not with applying categories to the data of sense intuition'³.

Judgment, according to Kant, is the unit of knowledge and since the second 'critique' is not concerned with the acquisition of knowledge, it is not easy to follow how Kant can, in the second 'critique', at all speak of any variety of judgment recognised in the first 'critique'. But Kant has actually done this. 'Synthetic judgments ... are about something which is, has been, or will be the case, or about

something which ought to be the case. Judgments of the first type are theoretical, of the second practical'⁴. The hypothetical and categorical imperatives, Kant tells us, are instances of analytical and synthetic a priori judgments, respectively.

But as we pass to the second 'critique' from the first one, one thing that strikes us is that Kant continues to stick to his firm conviction that all judgments without exception do not fit into the scheme either of 'Analytic a priori' or of 'synthetic a posteriori'. This time, of course, he attempts to vindicate his belief in a different direction. Here he is concerned not with how synthetic a priori theoretical judgments are possible, but with the synthetic a priori character of moral judgments. It may be observed here that when Kant claims 'synthetic a priori' character for moral judgments he does not claim this for every individual moral judgment but for the principles in accordance with which such judgments can be truly made. Kant believes that we do have or make synthetic a priori moral judgments. Thus in connection with the above conviction of Kant in the two 'critiques' the difference appears to lie not with the qualification 'synthetic a priori' but simply with the thing so qualified, i.e., 'judgment'. But it remains to be seen whether the qualification does not silently change its meaning with the change of context. Do we have synthetic a

priori judgments in the context of moral experience in exactly the same sense in which we have them in connection with theoretical experience ?

If we do not like to drag the debate any further, we may adopt at the very outset the positivistic assumption that 'only judgments which can be verified by sense are true' and say that moral judgments not being so verifiable and hence not being true are not judgments at all. Thus there is no point in discussing in what sense such judgments are synthetic a priori. But this line of approach should be avoided on some vital grounds. First, it is obvious that there is no reason to accept this positivistic assumption to be true if sensuous-experience is the only criterion of accepting anything to be true. It itself cannot be so verified. Second, in asserting the possibility of synthetic a priori judgments Kant is posing a challenge to the authenticity of the assumption that being sensibly verifiable and being true are identical. This very assumption which Kant himself challenges can not be reasonably used as a premise to challenge Kant's position. Moreover, if this criterion is adopted, the synthetic a priori judgments of the first critique will not fair any better.

[II]

There is a sense in which we may assert that in using the expression 'synthetic a priori' with reference to the moral law Kant is not making a new stipulation. And Kant himself believes that in claiming synthetic a priori judgments in the fields of mathematics, physics and moral thought he is not using the expression 'synthetic a priori' in different senses. The expression 'synthetic a priori' is a combination of two distinct terms, 'synthetic' and 'a priori'. The meaning of these terms have been separately clarified by Kant in the first 'critique'. If we stick to this original sense, i.e., the sense in which they have been used in the first 'critique', each term is applicable to the 'categorical imperative', which is, according to Kant, a synthetic a priori judgment in the second 'critique'. A proposition is synthetic, holds Kant in the first 'critique', "if its negation is not a contradiction in terms. It is a priori if it is logically independent of any proposition which describes sense-impressions"⁵. The proposition that a rational will is subject to the categorical imperative can be denied without self-contradiction. Again, this proposition, even the empiricists would admit, can not be shown to be logically dependent on any proposition describing sense-impressions. The proposition is both synthetic and a priori.

Thus we may be tempted to conclude that the expression 'synthetic a priori' is applicable to moral judgments as well as to theoretical ones, meaning thereby that we have synthetic a priori judgments in the second 'critique' in the sense in which we have them in the first 'critique'.

The meaning of a given combination of words is not always a logical product of the meanings of the individual words entering into that combination. The combination 'synthetic a priori' as used by Kant in the first 'critique' is a good example of this. In the first 'critique' when Kant calls any judgment synthetic a priori, he uses the expression 'synthetic a priori' in a technical sense. By synthetic a priori judgments Kant here means principles which state the conditions of the possibility of theoretical knowledge. The principle of causation, 'every event has a cause' is, according to Kant, a synthetic a priori judgment because we can not have any form of theoretical knowledge, empirical or a priori without assuming it to be true. Thus to say that a moral judgment is synthetic and is also a priori is not to say that we have 'synthetic a priori' judgments in the second 'critique' in the sense in which we have such judgments in the first one.

[III]

The synthetic a priori judgments, according to Kant, express conditions or assumptions required for the possibility of theoretical knowledge and Kant claims to have given a complete list of such judgments in the first 'critique'. "Just as Kant believes he has discovered all the categories and their schemata, so he believes he has discovered the synthetic a priori principles of all possible objective experience"⁶. If this claim is right then from the mere fact that the synthetic a priori moral judgments have not occurred in the first 'critique' it follows that they are of a different type from those occurring there.

But this does not mean that if Kant's claim were false, if that list of synthetic a priori judgments he thought complete were not really so, we could include the synthetic a priori moral judgments in the first 'critique'. In other words, what we intend to mean is that we can not have synthetic a priori judgments in the second 'critique' in exactly the same sense in which we have such judgments in the first 'critique'. It may, however, be stated here that Kant's claim, as a matter of fact, is not right. Korner holds that "Kant was mistaken in regarding Newton's physics as containing all the possible types of objective empirical

judgment and consequently in regarding his own list of a priori principles as complete"⁷.

Let us consider, in this connection, an important feature of all synthetic a priori judgments. All synthetic a priori judgments, no matter whether they belong to the first or to the second 'critique', holds Kant, are necessary. Necessity is a mark of a priority. But what does 'necessity' mean? It admits of different interpretations. A proposition is necessary if we can not deny it without self-contradiction. This is the sense in which the analytical propositions are necessary. This necessity is known as logical necessity. But no synthetic a priori propositions can be necessary in this sense simply because they are supposed to be synthetic. The necessity of the synthetic a priori theoretical judgments consists in their being conditions or assumptions of our having any experience of objects in space and time. This necessity has been termed 'transcendental necessity'. It is conditional and so it resembles Kant's 'hypothetical imperatives', which are of the form 'Do this if you want this'. 'Every event has a cause', for example, which is a synthetic a priori proposition of the first 'critique', is necessary only if there is human experience and if human reason has only a 'logical use'. If human reason or intellect had a 'real use', we could do

without the synthetic a priori principles of theoretical knowledge. In other words, in that case the synthetic a priori judgments of the first 'critique' would cease to be necessary for the acquisition of knowledge. Kant has recognised a distinction between a 'logical use' and a 'real use' of reason or intellect. "In its 'logical' use the function of the intellect is to intellectualize the data of sense or, in language Kant was to make familiar later, 'bring them to concepts' ... It is not, that is to say, a source of knowledge on its own account ... By contrast the 'real' use of the intellect is one in which that faculty acts independently of any other. The function of the intellect in this aspect is not the mere conceptualization of the given, but the production of knowledge on its own account"⁸.

But the moral principle, the categorical imperative is not necessary in this sense. We are not required to assume any moral principle to think about matters of fact. Our experience of the world of objects is not affected by what moral principle we happen to subscribe to. This, of course, does not mean that the categorical imperative is not objective. It is true that the term 'objectivity' "is used in complete different senses and often with no clear meaning at all"⁹. But yet it is without doubt that the objectivity of the categorical imperative is something different from

that of the synthetic a priori judgments of the first 'critique'. "It is clear that the objectivity or, if we like, the absolute validity of the categorical imperative must be different from the objectivity of the synthetic a priori principles which are the conditions of the experience of physical objects and science. The categorical imperative does not, whatever else its function may be, confer objectivity on perceptual judgments. The apprehension of it and the 'feeling' of respect for the law which accompanies it may conflict with desires which can be described by perceptual judgments. But it modifies neither these desires nor their description"¹⁰.

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It may, thus, be suggested that though we can not have synthetic a priori judgments in the second 'critique' in exactly the same sense in which we have such judgments in the first 'critique', we can speak of synthetic a priori judgments in the second 'critique', though in a slightly different sense — in the sense of being conditions of what we ought to do. In what follows let us see whether the categorical imperative, which is a synthetic a priori judgment, according to Kant, supplies a necessary requirement for the determination of obligation or duty, the

ultimate test of moral judgment.

That we have moral consciousness, holds Kant, is an undebatable fact of experience. We make moral judgments like, 'we ought to speak the truth'. The moral judgments are different from theoretical judgments, like, 'rain is more frequent in the summer than in any other season'. The theoretical judgments express what is the case. The moral judgments, on the other hand, are concerned with what we ought to do, and not with how men actually do behave. But moral judgments and theoretical judgments are alike in the important respect that none of them is a matter of caprice. Whether we judge something to be the case or judge an action to be moral we judge according to definite objective laws or principles. As Kant differs from the empiricists in holding that the theoretical judgments are not subjective association of ideas so also he differs from them in holding that a moral judgment is not an expression of our subjective feeling of approval or disapproval. An action is a moral action or a duty because of the principle or law by which it is determined. According to Kant, the moral value of the action lies "in the maxim according to which it has been decided upon"¹¹. There is an element of compulsion in morality. The linguistic expression of this compulsion or command is called by Kant an 'imperative'; and as

distinguished from the hypothetical imperatives, which are based on the contingent facts of individual desires and interests, the supreme principle of morality is called by Kant the 'categorical imperative'. "Hypothetical imperatives are the expressions of commands which are conditional on inclinations or purposes. They have the form 'Do this in order to achieve that'"¹². In such imperatives the actions commanded, says Copleston, "are conceived as being good with a view to attaining a certain end"¹³. The actions are not such which ought to be done for their own sake. Hypothetical imperatives are either 'imperatives of skill' or 'imperatives of prudence'. This distinction depends on the purpose on which the commands are conditional. In one case the purpose is contingent and in the other necessary for all human beings. But this does not make any difference to their essential nature, they have the same form. "Categorical imperatives, on the other hand, express commands which are not conditional on any purpose at all. They are not of the form 'Do this in order to achieve that', but simply 'Do this'."¹⁴ 'It commands, that is to say, that the maxims which serve as our principles of volition should conform to universal law'¹⁵.

The categorical imperative is, according to Kant, a synthetic a priori judgment. But as distinguished from a

synthetic a priori theoretical judgment of the first 'critique' it is ^apractical synthetic a priori, judgment.

"That is to say, it does not extend our theoretical knowledge of objects, as is done by the synthetic a priori propositions ... It is directed towards action, towards the performance of actions good in themselves, not towards our knowledge of empirical reality"¹⁶.

It is to be noted here that any individual moral judgment is not called by Kant a synthetic a priori moral judgment. The categorical imperative is a synthetic a priori judgment in being a test or condition for the determination of a moral principle or maxim and, indirectly, of moral action. An action, Kant holds, possesses moral worth only when it is chosen, and to choose an action is not just to behave but to adopt a principle or maxim in doing the action. Only rational beings can follow principles and so, according to Kant, morality is strictly an affair of rational beings; it is not restricted to human beings only. One of the fundamental ways in which Kant's ethical theory differs from that of Hume is that whereas morality, according to Hume, is simply a human affair, the fundamental principles of morality, holds Kant, are the same for every rational being, since the ultimate criterion of morality, according to Kant, is deducible from the concept of a rational being as such. Just as Hegel holds that to be real is to be rational, so Kant holds that to be moral is to be rational. The categorical

imperative says that a rational agent ought to do such and such. This categorical imperative has been formulated in different ways, and let us consider two such formulations to see what this imperative really determines.

1. 'Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law'.
2. 'Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature'¹⁷.

It is a bit difficult to see how these two formulations are formulations of exactly the same thing. Unlike the first formulation the second one requires us to know, Richard Norman holds, that our maxims of actions, when universalised, "could be consistent with the empirical facts of the natural world in which we have to act"¹⁸. If consistency with the facts of the world we live in is thus emphasised, the ultimate criterion of morality will no more be confined within the principle of 'universalisability' and that will be something not wanted by Kant, since in that case we will have only an empirical test of morality.

[v]

An important feature, of course, is common to both the above two formulations. They express a relation between the

concepts of 'rationality' and 'universality'. They require that, as rational beings, we should be able to universalise the maxims of our actions. It is not, perhaps, unjustified to assert a close relation between rationality and universality. We can not show something to be reasonable without going beyond the mere particularity of that thing. Moreover, universalisability may be interpreted to mean consistency, and consistency is a condition of being rationally justified. We are not rationally justified in adopting an action unless we can universalise it. In any valid argument we are required to use a term in one definite sense in all its occurrences. Consistency is a condition of intelligibility.

Again, Kant asserts another relation, a relation of identity between rational behaviour and moral behaviour. It is because of this that Kant thinks that moral distinctions could not be made to depend on any contingent fact about human beings, it is to be made on the sole consideration of man as such. "It is reason in man, Kant holds, that makes him a moral being ... He held it to be evident that the demands of morality are peculiarly and characteristically unconditional, absolute, or "categorical"; that the principles of morality are invariant; and that morality imposes its demands on free and responsible beings alone. If so, he argued -- in direct opposition to Hume -- that

moral distinction must be "derived from reason" and not from a "moral sense" or any other feeling, sentiment, desire, or any passion whatever"¹⁹.

The identification of rational and moral behaviours can be accepted if being consistent ^{i.e., universal} and being obligatory are not different; and Kant, of course, does not explicitly say this to be the case. His categorical imperative is a negative test. Actions whose maxims can not be universalised, i.e., whose maxims do not accord with the categorical imperative are such which we ought not to perform, are such which are impermissible. This is also clear from the application of the categorical imperative to maxims. Kant has given four examples of this application. Let us consider Kant's second example which is 'intended as an example of a logical contradiction being involved in turning one's maxim into a universal law'²⁰. A man needs money and he can have it only by promising to pay it back, though he knows that he would not be able to repay it. Then his maxim is ; when I am in need of money, I will borrow it and promise to repay it, though I know that I shall not be able to do so. If this maxim is elevated into a universal law, such promises and the purpose which they serve would become impossible. So the maxim is not moral.

Kant appears to have thought that the proposition which results from the universalisation of the maxim is itself

self-contradictory. But Copleston wrightly observes that it is difficult to see how the proposition that 'anyone who is in need and can obtain relief only by making a promise which he can not fulfil may make such a promise' is self-contradictory in purely logical sense. But the important thing which is evident from this and the other three examples of Kant is that in every case what the test shows is that this or that maxim or action is not moral, but it never identifies any maxim or action to be moral.

Kant does not want to say that "all actions which do accord with the categorical imperative are ones which we ought to perform"²¹. But Kant wants to say that "there are positive as well as negative duties"²². But how can we identify a positive duty with the help of the categorical imperative, which is a negative test? This can be done on the assumption that a positive duty of the form 'you ought to do X' can be restated, Richard Norman holds, as 'Failure to do X is impermissible'²³.

But why should we allow this assumption? If 'impermissible' and 'obligatory' are contradictory terms, we can affirm one by eliminating the other. To think them contradictory is to make a bold and unwarranted step, and Kant makes such a step. Kant claims, Warnock holds: 'that his test of universal acceptability without conflict

suffices to rule out certain principles as unacceptable, but also that it definitely identifies certain principles — the principle of morality — as demanding acceptance.²⁴ To claim this is to make the obviously false claim that a proposition is true simply because there would be no contradiction or inconsistency in asserting it. This suggests that Kant's categorical imperative is not a synthetic a priori judgment in the sense of stating a condition of what is obligatory or moral. In this sense, it does not make moral judgments possible. It expresses simply a condition or test of what is impermissible and does not determine what should be done. Korner²⁵ holds that Kant's principle of morality is highly relevant to the way in which the morality of actions is judged; but to say this is not to say that his principle is a necessary and sufficient test of morality of action.

But even if, for the sake of argument, we accept Kant's supreme principle of morality, i.e., the categorical imperative to be a condition of moral judgments, it must be different from a synthetic a priori theoretical judgment, which has a necessary reference to space and time, discussed by Kant in the first 'critique'.

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