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WHAT WE MAY SAY TO HARE IN THE LIGHT OF KANTIAN ETHICS

Introduction

The debates upon the possibility of weakness of will¹ can still be traced in the literature on contemporary ethics'. Some moral philosophers believe in the possibility of weakness of will while others do not.

A well-known Kantian moral philosopher, R.M. Hare is one of the authors who maintain the impossibility of weakness of will. He argues that weakness of will, or *akrasia*, is impossible. It means that it is impossible for a person to do one action if (s)he genuinely and in the fullest sense holds that (s)he ought instead to do something else.

Hare has used many concepts from Kant, especially the idea of universalizability, in order to defend his idea about impossibility of weakness of will. Hare presents a theory named as «universal prescriptivism». According to this theory, moral terms such as «good», «ought» and «right» have two logical or semantic properties: universalizability and prescriptivity. By the former, he means that moral judgments must identify the situation they describe according to a finite set of universal terms, excluding proper names, but not definite descriptions. By the latter, he means that moral agents must perform those acts they consider themselves as having obligation to perform whenever they are physically and psychologically able to do so. In other words, he argues that it makes no sense for someone to say, sincerely: «I ought to do X» and then fail to do X.

This essay attempts to prove that it is possible to be a Kantian philosopher and to defend the possibility of weakness of will. To begin with, we must see what Hare would say to an agent who is about to do an action while better choices are available. Then, we should examine what Kant might say in the same context. Then, we will discuss, in the light of Kantian ethics, whether Hare's point of view is complete. So I chart the paper as follows. First, I will present Hare's theory of the impossibility of weakness of will. Then, I

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¹ The standard account of «weakness of will» identifies it with *akrasia*. *Akrasia*, in the literature on ethics', is an agent's action contrary to his better judgment while other better choices are available [Stroud, 2008]. However, the new account of weakness of will, presented by R. Holton, holds that weakness of will is not action contrary to one's better judgment at all. Weakness of will, according to this approach, is a certain kind of failure to stick to one's intentions [Holton, 1999: p. 241–262; see also Holton, 2009: p. 73–78] In this essay, weakness of will refers only to the standard account; for we are focusing on R.M. Hare's point of view.

will have a survey on Kant's moral literature, the foundational doctrines of *Critique of Practical Reason*, in order to draw a sharp distinction between two types of will, namely empirical and pure will. We shall see then if Hare's perspective is ambiguous. If we accept the Kantian-based classification of will which is based on *Second Critique*, it seems to be doubtful that weakness of will is impossible for all types of will. Thus, it is possible to defend both Kant's moral philosophy and the possibility of weakness of will.

Hare on Impossibility of Weakness of Will

For Hare, there are three steps on moral argument. The first one is the study of the language of morals. The next stage is that of the gathering facts. The final step is the exercise of the imagination [Gulter, 1971: p. 295].

By using a Kantian Phrase «willing a universal law», Hare holds that moral language involves two functions: prescription and universalization [Ibid., p. 296]. While we are trying to decide what to do, as Hare tells, indeed we are doing an action which we can commit ourselves (prescriptively), but which we are at the same time to accept as a principle for others, which is yourself a part, in like circumstances (universalizability) [Hare, 1963: p. 89–90].

According to Hare, the function of moral philosophy is that of enabling us to think better about moral issues by exposing the logical structure of the language in which this thoughts is expressed [Ibid., p. v]. So, he is impressed by the «special character» of evaluative judgments. He begins by identifying, as the fundamental different feature of evaluative judgments, that which lends them a special character, that evaluative judgments are intended to *guide conduct* [Ibid., p. 1; p. 127].

All evaluative judgments play role for an agent to do actions. These functions can be known as «guide conduct» in his view. *Guide conduct* is an action-guiding which answer to the practical question «What shall I do?» For Hare, none of the descriptive statements can answer to the practical question. So the evaluative judgments, (or the properties which express them), are not descriptive statements [Ibid., p. 46]. Then, *Let me do that action* is the answer which these non-descriptive properties require [Ibid., p. 55].

The general pattern in views like Hare's viewpoint is to suppose that if the antecedents of the action are rationally structured in a certain way, then the action will follow by casual necessity [Searle, 2001: p. 220–221]. So in Hare's point of view, the process of doing action which includes evaluative judgments and entails the necessity of doing the action is as follows: If *agent A* agrees to do action *a*, according to his evaluative judgment it will be understood as «*He shall do action a*». Then it will be entailed such a command *Let do action a*.

In order to explain the weak-willed cases, where the agent does an action contrary to their better judgment, Hare's view holds that if an agent accept an imperative, or a command, then it follows by casual necessity that their acceptance of the imperative will lead to the performance of the action, and on this view, to accept a moral judgment is to accept an imperative [Ibid.: p. 222].

One of the way in which we can understand the moral principles which *agent A* believes is investigating the actions he *did*. For Hare, this way is one of the best ways helps us to know one's moral principles [Ibid., p. 1]. Also, *agent A* does not believe in the goodness of *action a* if he does not do that. These two important points show the impossibility of weak-willed actions.

As it mentioned earlier, according to the process of doing actions in Hare's point of view, it is true to conclude that everyone always does what (s)he thinks (s)he ought to. So

if someone did/does not do an action, it means that he did/does not consider that action as the better or best action (in that time). On this view, then, akratic or weak-willed actions as we have understood them are impossible [Ibid., p. 169].

In other words, in weak-willed situations, though the agent claims to accept a moral principle, when the time of action arrives, (s)he lifts, as Hare once called it, a corner of the net [Ibid., p. 53], so that (s)he escapes from the principle's scope of regulation [Spitzley, 2008: p. 298]. Then, (s)he will do the action(s) holds that (s)he ought to do in that time.

It seems that Hare's point of view in presenting the mentioned process is similar to the aim Kant seeks it in his literature. Moral philosophy, in Kant's point of view addresses the question, What ought I to do? and an answer to that question requires much more than delivering the fundamental principle of morality. However, there is a classification mentioned in Kant's moral philosophy which prevents us to conclude that the same process happens for an agent in all actions. Based on this classification, an agent encounter «willing a universal law» only in cases which will is autonomous, i.e. *pure*.

In the interest of finding such a classification, let us turn to Immanuel Kant.

Empirical and Pure Will in Kantian Ethics

All practical principles which presuppose an object (matter) of the faculty of desire as the ground of determination of the will are empirical, and can furnish no practical laws.

[Kant, 1889: p. 107]²

All material practical rules place the determining principle of the will in the lower desires, and if there were no purely formal laws of will adequate to determine it, then we could not admit any higher desire at all.

[Ibid.: p. 109]

As Kant presents in Second Critique, «reason is concerned with the grounds of determination of the will, which is a faculty either to produce corresponding to ideas, or to determine ourselves to the effecting of such objects (whether the physical power is sufficient or not)» [Ibid., p. 101].

Therefore, there are two different origins which determine will. They can be known as «material principle of determination» [Ibid., p. 112] and «purely formal rule of determination» [Ibid., p. 109]. What follows is an investigation for the possible differences within the will which the weakness refers to.

The *Will* can be determined by «Material principles». It will be happened while the will is directed to something *else*, e.g. a desire to have X or to do X, etc [Ibid., p. 107]. As an example, which can be traced in the Second Critique [Ibid., p. 106–107]. When a man tells that we must be industrious and thrifty in youth, in order that we may not want in old age, although this is a correct and important principle, it is not a law at all; even if the man tells it as a universal principle; for the will is directed to something *else* (not itself) which is presupposed that it desires.

According to Kant's explanation of the entity of material principles, it is possible to formulate it as follows:

(1) Material principles as such are of one and the same kind, and come under the general principle of self-love [Ibid., p. 108];

² All translations of Kant's Second Critique refers to [Kant, 1889].

(2) The principle of self-love cannot set up as a practical (universal) law [Ibid., p. 113];

Therefore,

(3) Material principles cannot set up as a practical (universal) law.

And,

(4) Material principles as such are of one and the same kind, and come under the general principle of self-love [Ibid., p. 108];

(5) The principle of self-love only desires [Ibid., p. 126];

Therefore,

(6) Material principle(s) only desire(s).

There is a noticeable difference within the universal law, and the material principles which come under the general principle of self-love. In order to clear out what it means, let us turn to two examples Kant presents: «Suppose that an acquaintance whom you otherwise liked were to attempt to justify himself to you for having borne false witness, first by alleging the, in his view, sacred duty of consulting his own happiness; the by enumerating the advantages which he had gained thereby, pointing out the prudence he had shown in securing himself against detection, even by yourself, to whom he now reveals the secret, only in order that he may be able to deny it at any time; and suppose he were ten to affirm, in all seriousness, that he has fulfilled a true human duty; you would either laugh in his face, or shrink back from him with disgust [...] or suppose some one recommends you a man a steward, as a man to whom you can blindly trust all your affairs; and, in order to inspire you with confidence, extols him as a prudent man who thoroughly understands his own interest, and is so indefatigably active that he lets slip no opportunity of advancing it; lastly, lest you should be afraid of finding a vulgar selfishness in him, praises the good taste with which he lives; not seeking his pleasure in money-making' or in coarse wantonness, but in the enlargement of his knowledge, in instructive intercourse with a select circle, and even in relieving the needy; while as to means [...] he is not particular, and is ready to use other people's money for the purpose as if it were his own, provided only he knows that he can do safely, and without discovery; you would either believe that the recommender was mocking you, or that he had lost his senses. So sharply and clearly marked are the boundaries of morality and self-love that even the commonest eye cannot fail to distinguish whether a thing belongs to the one or the other» [Ibid., p. 124–125].

The law of the pure will brings the will into a sphere quite different from the empirical [Ibid., p. 122]. For the universal law commands while they only desire. «Now there is a great difference between that which we are desired to do and that to which we are obliged» [Ibid., p. 126]. Material principles, which cannot set up as a universal law, are merely empirical and determine the will empirically and would not possess the necessity which is conceived in every law [Ibid., p. 113].

Furthermore, all material principles place the determination of the will in the *lower* desire [Ibid., p. 109]. But it is still possible for the will to distinguish between lower desire and higher desire [Ibid., p. 108]. In other words, it is possible for the will to be determined by the lower desire or the higher one while not only it distinguishes between them but the other one is available also. Suppose that the will is determined by the lower desire. In this case, no universal law can be imagined. Also, the will is determined while it *still* distinguishes that it can choose the higher one.

According to Kant's terms, an objection the realization of which is desired named as «the faculty of desire» [Ibid., p. 107]. Therefore, it is possible to rank the «faculty of

desire» based on the rank of desire. For it relates to, at least, two groups of desire, i.e. lower and higher.

By the mentioned relation, the will may choose the faculty of lower or higher desire while the other one is available. If so, weakness of will, according to the mentioned definition, is possible when the will choose the faculty of lower desire. In other words, in the first classification of the will, i.e. the empirical will, weakness of will is possible.

(One of) the reason(s) makes the weakness of (*empirical*) will possible is its relation with desires. For, in Kant's viewpoint, no everyone is willing to obey the universal law if they oppose his inclination. In order to prevent the empirical will from being determined by (at least) the lower desires, we can only command the means or supply them [Ibid., p. 126–127]. As an example, «suppose that someone asserts of his lustful appetite that, then the desired object and the opportunity are present, it is quite irresistible. Ask him if a gallows were erected before the house where he finds this opportunity, in order that he should be hanged thereon immediately after the gratification of his lust, whether he could not to control his passion, we need not be long in doubt what he would reply» [Ibid., p. 118].

If depraved persons³, as Hill J R. explains in the light of Kant's literature, act on bad maxims contrary to their practical reason, they cannot encounter «willing a universal law» [Hill, 2008: p. 221].

However, if the will is thought independent on empirical conditions, and therefore as pure will, it can *only* be determined by the mere form of law [Kant, 1889: p. 119]. So, pure will is determined by itself alone and gives to human beings a universal law which Kant calls it «Moral Law» [Ibid., p. 120].

The pure will is determined by the law which has legislated by itself, i.e. universal law. Pure will is *only* directed to itself. Then «the law in this case determines the will directly; the action conformed to it is good in itself; a will whose (principles) always conforms to this law is good absolutely and is the supreme condition of all good» [Ibid., p. 153].

Since the universal law determines both the pure will [Ibid., p. 154] and the concept of the good which is the object of pure will and makes it possible [Ibid., p. 155], then there is no room for imagining another choice before the pure will. Therefore, not only because of the only choice before the pure will but also because of the existence of one possible object, weakness of *pure* will is impossible.

The Universal law, or Moral Law, is necessary and universal. It cannot have any intuition, nor consequently any schema supplied to it [Ibid., p. 161]. Consequently the rule of judgment and deciding for doing actions is based exactly on the universal law; it is unique.

The rule of the judgment and deciding of doing actions, as Kant explains, is this: «ask yourself whether, if the action you propose were take place by a law of the system of nature of which you were yourself a part, you could regard it as possible by your own will. Everyone dose, in fact, decide by this rule whether actions are morally good.» [Ibid.].

The ambiguity of Hare's viewpoint of impossibility of weakness of will

If we return again to Hare's view point, it seems that Hare is trying to prove the process in which pure will is deciding to do actions. If so, weakness of will is also impossible in Kantian ethics⁴.

³ The depraved and weak persons are those who choose to fulfill rather than to overcome the evil [Hill, 2008: p. 221]

What can be considered as a distinction between Hare and Kant's viewpoint is the fact that the will might be «a pure one» or «the empirical one». The distinction identifies «duality within unity» [Watson, 2007: p. 199–200]. Neglecting to consider the «duality» (within the unity) of the will can be considered as a reason which makes Hare's point of view completely different from what Kant's point of view tries to present.

Based on the mentioned difference(s), there are still questions in front of Hare's point of view: is there any difference within the will in this viewpoint, i.e. «universal prescriptivism», similar to the distinction presented in Kant's theory? If so, is weakness of will impossible in each type? Furthermore, it is not obvious that is the process of doing actions in the context in which the will is determined by itself as same as the context in which the will is determined by a very low desire? This can be considered as the ambiguity of Hare's viewpoint.

As it remarked, Hare's perspective fails to consider different kinds of contexts which will is determined by different faculties like a low or higher desire. In that case, it is impossible to talk about «willing a universal law». For, in the light Kantian ethics, «willing a universal law» only relates to the contexts in which will is determined *only* by itself.

Additionally there is no room for explaining some facts such as moral regret in Hare's theory. If all agents do only actions which they are genuinely and in the fullest sense hold they ought to do, as Hare holds, why there are facts like «moral regret»? Moral regret, as J.R. Hill explains [Hill, 2008: p. 222], is a sign that one does the wrong action. If so, that particulate maxim, i.e. the maxim(s) for doing wrong action(s), cannot be considered as a universal law in Kant's ethics while it can be considered as a universal law(s) in Hare's theory.

Conclusion

«Is weakness of will Possible?» is a question which still can be traced in the contemporary literature on ethics. R.M. Hare, one of the Kantian philosophers, holds on impossibility of it. In this paper, in the light of Kant's moral philosophy, it has remarked that Hare's viewpoint has ambiguity. That is because of failing to distinguish two different types of will, namely empirical and pure will. Weakness of will is impossible if it is the pure will. If not, weakness of will is possible.

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⁴ It is possible to claim that weakness of will may even happen in pure will. It may appear, for example, as the weakness of legislation [Hill, 2008: p. 229–230] However, according to Kant's literature weakness of pure will is impossible. If the fact like the weakness of legislation happens, it shows that the will is not pure; it is still an empirical one. If the will is thought independent on empirical conditions, and therefore as pure will, it will be necessarily determined by the mere form of law [Kant, 1889: p. 119].

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What We May Say to Hare in The Light of Kantian Ethics?

Some Kantian philosophers, like R. M. Hare, hold that weakness of will is impossible. The reason is that when an agent agrees to do an action, according to his evaluative judgment it will be understood as «He shall do that action». If so, all agents do only actions which they are genuinely and in the fullest sense hold they ought to do. Therefore, weakness of will, which is known as an agent's action contrary to his better judgment, is impossible. However, this perspective is vague because it misses the difference within the will which weakness refers to. In the light of Kantian ethics, at least two different types of will can be known, namely empirical and pure will. We should consider the possibility of weakness of will in each type separately. We argue that weakness of will is impossible if it is the pure will; if not, weakness of will is possible.

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