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Hartmann's Critique of Kant's Ethics and Its Enduring Relevance

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Abstract

The depth and profundity of Kant's ethical thinking did not escape the notice of subsequent moral philosophers. Among others, in recent times, phenomenological ethicists have sharply responded to Kant's ethical ideas, which have exercised a powerful and pervasive influence over the centuries down to the present era. Nicolai Hartmann is one such thinker who has duly recognized some aspects of importance in Kantian ethics, though he is highly critical of other aspects of his ethical thinking. Hartmann has devoted a section of his book 'Ethics' to critically appraise Kant's ethics. This research paper proposes to delineate, explicate, and reflect on Hartmann's criticism of Kant's ethical framework under three different sections, viz., (i) Subjectivism in Kant (ii) Formalism in Kant, and (iii) Intellectualism in Kant. By emphasizing the significance of intuitive insights, substantive values, and context-sensitive moral judgments, Hartmann's critique offers a more refined understanding of moral experience. This research also provides a framework for addressing complex moral dilemmas and challenges Kant's rigid moral absolutism. Through a detailed analysis of both philosophers' work, this study contributes to ongoing discussions in moral philosophy, exploring the delicate balance between universality and particularity in ethical thought and its implication for modern moral inquiry.

Keyword: Absolutism, Phenomenology, Subjectivism, Formalism, Intellectualism, Intuition, Values, Will, Apriori, Aposteriori, Good, Feeling.

Preface:

Nicolai Hartmann (1882–1950) was born in Riga, Latvia, and started his scholarly career with intensive work on Greek philosophy under the supervision of Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp at Marburg in Germany. His remarkable work *Ethics*, to begin with, first appeared in German in 1926, and an English translation in 1932. The moral hypothesis clarified in this book appears to contain three broad points: (i) metaphysical, (ii) phenomenological, and (iii) aretaic aspect.[1] At the outset, it can be said that he held great respect for Plato throughout his life, as evident from the following statement:

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> "Platonic ideal is not dead, the ideal of ruling and moulding mankind spiritually through the power of philosophical perception, through the vision of ideas."[2]

Though, his interest does not lie with Plato's metaphysics in general, but with the idea of 'Being'. For, he equates the 'being of values' with the 'being of Ideas'.

With respect to the second dimension of his moral thought, it may be pointed out that he is influenced by Husserl's phenomenology. His reasoning contains a significant number of phenomenological elements. Hartmann isn't concerned with foundational issues of phenomenology but uses it to deal with philosophical issues. So, phenomenology comes to his use only when he utilizes it as part of his strategy to address philosophical issues. For him, any reflections on strategy bear meaning only when they succeed in settling philosophical difficulties and issues. In ethics, he puts phenomenology to use when he examines, especially, the way in which values are found.[3]

Hartmann recognizes the authentic role of 'feeling' in the revelation of values. It is taken by him to have cognitive authority. It is an emotional mode of cognition, which is underived from rationality. It is non-logical; however, it is a primal form of value-cognition. In depicting this mode of emotive cognition of values, Hartmann has recourse to the phenomenological idea of 'intuition'. He agrees with Husserl that there are 'universal essences', which are 'Ideal' in nature, though their existence does not begin from thought. He recognizes Scheler's use of phenomenology to negate Kantian formalism. In reality, Husserl and Scheler had an incredible impact on the development of Hartmann's theory of ethics.[4]

For the aretaic perspective, the ground of moral assessment is the character or disposition of an agent. Such a hypothesis places 'virtue' instead of the 'good' or the 'right' at its core. Aristotle displayed such a theory earlier, and Hartmann is definitely influenced by Aristotle in reinterpreting 'virtue' in the light of advanced European ethos. By 'virtue', Hartmann seems to understand a 'dispositional property' displayed by a moral agent in order to actualize an ideal value that subsists in a trans-natural domain. Hence, for Hartmann, each virtue is continuously related to an ideal value.[5]

Hartmann was emphatically influenced by Neo-Kantianism. As a student of a Neo-Kantian school, Hartmann makes Kantian reasoning the starting point of his philosophical thinking. At that time, there were two Neo-Kantian mainstreams – Marburgian Neo-Kantianism (Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp, and Ernst Cassirer) and Badenian or Southwestern Neo-Kantianism (Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, and Emil Lask). Both schools interpreted Kant's reasoning as a hypothesis of cognition. Neo-Kantianism also claimed that Kant rejected metaphysics and wanted to set up the hypothesis of cognition as a modern "philosophia prima." In contrast, Hartmann, along with Heidegger, emphasized the metaphysical meaning of Kant's doctrine. They both claim that there is no hypothesis of cognition without ontology and metaphysics.[6]

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As moral disunity evokes a kind of moral confusion among mankind, one of the primary concerns is the unity of values. Nicolai Hartmann pursues this theme in several places in his writings. He writes in Book I, "The unity of ethics is the fundamental demand which raises its voice categorically above the plurality of morals." If there is a common ground in ethics, it must be rooted deep below the diverse spectrum of human moral convictions, serving as the bedrock for ethical unity.[7]

The classic work that explains the unity of values is Plato's *Dialogues*. The search for the interconnectedness and possible unity of the virtues is discussed in *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, and *Statesman*. *Protagoras* contains the most sophisticated discussion of the matter. Socrates asks Protagoras, "Is virtue a single whole, and are justice and temperance and holiness parts of it, or are these latter only names for one and the same thing?" Protagoras answers, "Virtue is one, and the qualities you ask about are parts of it, as parts to a whole".[8]

In further discussion, Socrates step by step proves the unity of virtues by specifying the common content of all things. For example, the common content of 'virtue' is goodness. Due to 'goodness,' they are substantially identified. 'Goodness,' on the other hand, is identified with the common content of 'pleasantness in all things.' All striving after the 'good' as the final end of action requires knowledge of the 'pleasant' and the means to achieve it.[9]

The notion of 'good' is often reduced to a singular concept, such as 'hedonism' or 'utilitarianism.' However, this oversimplification neglects the complexity of human purposes and moral experiences. A unified moral perspective is essential, yet exclusive moral claims can be problematic. Philosophical ethics must reconcile these differences, seeking a comprehensive understanding of values through phenomenological inquiry and critical evaluation.[10]

Thus, after a brief introduction to Hartmann's moral philosophy, this research paper moves toward its primary concern: Hartmann's criticism of Kantian ethics and its relevance in the present time.

Analysis of Subjectivism in Kant:

Hartmann's philosophical orientation converges with the historical tradition, positing values as objective and inherent. In contrast, Kant's philosophical framework diverges from this stance, introducing a distinct perspective on values. The disparity between Hartmann's adherence to traditional thought and Kant's innovative approach highlights the fundamental difference in their philosophical commitments. Criticizing the subjectivism of practical reason, Hartmann lays down the following points:

1. In Kant's ethical philosophy, the concept of "good will" takes precedence, as it is the 'will' that initiates actions and makes decisions based on pure practical reason rather than personal inclinations or external circumstances.

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> Hartmann poses a question about how the 'will' and 'values' relate to each other at this juncture.[11]

Hartmann states that the 'will' has the power only to choose—to either carry out or not carry out the commandments. It cannot itself issue any commandments. Commandments or the moral law can be issued only by a source or agency other than or outside of the 'will'. That agency is the independent realm of objective values themselves. In other words, the 'values' themselves are the source of issuing commandments, not the 'will'. These commandments are addressed to the 'will'. Since the 'will' has the power and freedom to choose whether to carry out the commandments, it retains its autonomy even though the commandments come from outside the 'will'.[12]

For Kant, the source of commandments is the 'will', which also acts as the agent for carrying out the commandments. Thus, the 'will' has a double function:

(a)Issuing commandments, (b)Carrying out or not carrying out the commandments.

According to Hartmann, (a) is not necessary for the autonomy of the 'will', because the autonomy of the 'will' consists in (b).

The consequence of the above-stated position of Kant is that it makes 'ought' (moral values) subservient to the 'will'. The 'will' is something subjective, that is, it resides in a moral subject and, therefore, cannot supply us with something objective. The 'will,' as a subjective principle, cannot issue an objective principle. That is, 'ought,' as an objective principle of morality, cannot originate from the 'will,' which belongs to a moral subject. The 'ought,' in order to have its authoritative character, cannot be made subordinate to a subjective principle. The error of Kant, according to Hartmann, lies in placing 'ought' (moral values, which are objective) under something that is not itself a value (the will, which is subjective). In Kant's ethics, it is the 'will,' instead of 'value,' that has been given the authority to set up the moral standard. Thus, 'ought' (moral value), in Kant's ethical framework, originates from the subjective principle of the 'will'.

In other words, in Kant's philosophy, the subject comes to rank higher and thus surpasses the object, and the object, in a way, remains subordinated to the subject.

What follows is that Kant legitimizes the subject with authority to issue the commandments and thereby to set up the standard of what ought to be done. This has been summarized by Hartmann as follows:

> "*...the will determines or creates the values, not the values the will. The will is, then, not bound to something which in itself has value, but value is nothing else than an expression for that towards which the will is directed. Values are directional concepts of the pure will.*"[13]

2. Kant's assertion that the 'will' possesses both autonomy and freedom precipitates a profound paradox. If the 'will' is genuinely autonomous, it must be the self-legislating originator of its own laws, thereby precluding

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the possibility of transgression. Conversely, if the will's freedom consists in its capacity to either conform to or violate its laws, then its autonomy as a lawgiver is compromised. This dichotomy exposes a fundamental contradiction in Kant's position, as the 'will' cannot simultaneously be the sovereign originator of its laws and the free agent capable of subverting them. Hartmann highlights this paradox, emphasizing the inherent tension between the 'will's autonomy' and 'freedom' in Kant's philosophy. Hartmann avers:

"...For Kant, the pure will is accepted as free, exactly insofar as it has no other ground of determination than the principle which inheres in its own essence. Consequently, Kant's 'free' will has, in truth, on the basis of these determinations, self-legislation (in the strict sense, 'autonomy') but has no freedom in the proper sense of the word. It is subject to the autonomous principle of its essence exactly as nature is subject to natural law."[14]

"Hartmann thus concludes that transcendental subjectivism, which posits the 'will' as the autonomous originator of its own laws, is not only unnecessary for the doctrine of freedom of the 'will' but, in fact, stands in direct opposition to it. By prioritizing autonomy, transcendental subjectivism inadvertently undermines the very freedom it seeks to establish."[15]

3. According to Kant, there can be two sources of the commandment or the moral law: (a) Nature, (b) Reason. For Kant, the commandment or the moral principle must be 'apriori' and categorical in character, and therefore, cannot be empirical and hypothetical in nature. From this, it follows that the commandment, according to Kant, must have its origin in reason alone which, makes 'the ought' dependent upon the 'will'. Showing the logical error in the argument of Kant, Hartmann says:

"The whole argumentation has the form of a disjunctive inference in the '*Modus Tollendo Ponens*'. According to which only two possibilities exist. The one is proved to be false. Only the other remains."[16] The logical format to this is-

$$p \vee q$$
$$\sim p$$
$$\therefore q$$

According to Hartmann, it is the narrowness of the Kantian attitude that excludes a third possibility—*"From it, nothing can be disjunctively inferred. The exclusion of one member does not entail the setting up of the other. The concept of the 'aprioristic' does not coincide with that of origin in reason. The alternative is false, the disjunction not complete. It is a false inference."*.[17]

Kant's mistake lies in his inability to attribute superiority to the subject itself due to his philosophical compulsion. Hartmann writes:

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> *"Geometrical relations cannot indeed be derived from things, not even from drawn figures, but are at best illustrated by these; they are nonetheless on that account something purely objective, something which is discerned as objects, and they have no involvement with the functions of consciousness."*[18]

Kant's misinterpretation of the objectivity of *a priori* knowledge stemmed from his bias toward accepting only the empirical as objectively valid. This bias led to the confusion of 'idealism' and impacted not only ethical dilemmas but also distorted the theories of knowledge and pure logic by making them subjective. As a result, all disciplines with ideal objects were negatively affected by this prejudice. Hartmann says:

> *"...from all this, ethics can learn that the universality, the apriority, and the categorical character of the principle have no need of a subjective origin—even though it be an origin of the highest dignity, an origin in the constitution of practical reason itself. Its only need is an origin which is not to be found in naturalistic objectivity—that is, not in nature or in the world perceived by the senses."*[19]

The solution to this problem depends on understanding that there exists a fundamental source of values that is independent of human experiences, opinions, and beliefs (Innate). This source is a self-sustaining foundation (Ideal sphere) that provides a ground for understanding what is right and wrong, good and bad. The values derived from this source are inherently true and exist regardless of human recognition or validation.

Analysis of Formalism in Kant:

Kant's ethical theory has frequently been labeled as 'formalism' by his critics, and Hartmann also reflects this criticism in his own way. According to Kant, a genuine moral commandment, a categorical and autonomous imperative, can only be a formal law. It cannot prescribe what ought to be 'willed.' All "material" determination of the 'will' is derived from things and their relations, which, due to natural tendencies and impulses, appear to be worth striving for. A materially determined 'will' is determined empirically, that is, "from outside." Material determination is naturalistic, not rational. It is not determination by the law and by the essence of the 'good.' For the essence of the 'good' is a purely formal quality of the 'will.' That which is evident and of permanent value in this doctrine is:

1. The radical rejection of empiricism in ethics.
2. Rejection of causality and predetermined ends, which rely on empirical content.
3. The exaction of a strict universality.
4. The exclusion of external determinants.
5. The conviction that 'goodness' is a quality of the 'will' itself, not of the ends it pursues.

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So, the imperative that lays down the general constitution of a 'good will' must be 'formal.' It must contain no material determination. It is an agreement of the 'empirical will' with the 'ideal will,' in which one can will to be a "universal legislation."

Hartmann observes that the extended formalism of Aristotle, who was in favor of pure form, lies behind the formalism of Kantian ethics. Matter is considered as something uncertain, dark, and of lower esteem. On the other hand, form is thought to be the guiding principle. The Aristotelian predisposition continues to play a significant role in Kant's moral philosophy and theory of knowledge. But the most important point in Kantian ethics, as noticed by Hartmann, is that all the principles of the category, schemata, imperatives, and postulates are 'formal' and are at the same time 'a priori.' Therefore, the 'a priori' and 'formal' are alike in Kant's view. The distinction between 'a priori' and 'aposteriori' is unrelated to the dichotomy between formal and natural aspects. So, according to Kant, only that which is 'a priori' is 'formal,' and that which is materialistic is not 'a priori' in nature.

Hartmann says, *"For sure, whatever is 'a priori' is universally valid, but it is not true that universal character is always something 'formal.' "*The materiality of a moral commandment does not necessarily undermine its 'a priori' status. Hartmann argues that the 'will's' determination by transcendent, non-empirical values (existing independently of experience) constitutes a distant paradigm for Kant's empirical account, where the 'will' is shaped by phenomenal inclinations, such as pleasure or pain derived from sensory experience.[20]

In Hartmann's words:

> *"…Material determination is not naturalistic determination. It does not necessarily spring from general extensional laws; it does not imply any causal dependency. It does not degrade the human will into a 'natural entity.' For its origin can be perfectly autonomous, its objectivity purely aprioristic.*"[21]

Hartmann concludes by stating that the autonomy of values, whether 'formal' or 'material,' is predicated on their self-dependence and independence from extrinsic principles. 'A priori' knowledge, as a distinct epistemological modality, furnishes a nuanced understanding of objective values, acknowledging the possibility of both comprehension and misapprehension. This conceptualization mitigates concerns regarding the material content of values. Moreover, the historical conflation of 'a priori' knowledge with 'subjective idealism' has precipitated ethical formalism. By excising 'subjective idealism,' however, we can dismantle the formalist paradigm and cultivate a more sophisticated understanding of values, unencumbered by dogmatic strictures and receptive to contextual nuance.

Intellectualism in Kant:

Immanuel Kant's ethical framework exhibits a characteristic emphasis on intellectualism, which is closely tied to its formalist structure. Kant's

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epistemological stance is marked by a specific emphasis on rational faculties, which is situated within a broader spectrum of philosophical thought. In comparison to his predecessors, such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Kant's position on intellectualism is notable for its distinct moderation. The relationship between sensory perception and rational faculties in Kant's system is characterized by a dualistic framework, which is a defining feature of his philosophical approach. Thus, in Kant's epistemology, understanding or thought is assigned an active role in the knowledge process, specifically the role of legislating laws to nature. Similarly, in his practical philosophy, reason, in its practical application, is tasked with imposing a meaningful structure upon our disparate inclinations, thereby issuing moral commandments. This dichotomy between sense and understanding in Kant's philosophy prioritizes the latter, with understanding being accorded a superior status. This aspect of Kant's thought has been critiqued by Hartmann as 'intellectualism,' suggesting an overemphasis on the role of reason. The distinction between 'a priori' and 'aposteriori' knowledge is not rigorously drawn. Perception yields 'aposteriori' knowledge, while understanding, thought, and reason exemplify 'a priori' knowledge. The matter-form contrast mediates this distinction, rooted in the objective-subjective dichotomy between the object's givenness and the subject's agency.[22]

a. Kant's epistemology posits that 'a posteriori' knowledge is solely derived from sensory experience, whereas Hartmann contends that the 'given' encompasses not only sensory content but also 'a priori' elements, such as Kantian categories. In contrast to Kant's focus on gnoseological objectivity, which prioritizes theoretical content over sensory evidence, Hartmann argues that the 'given' is a product of theoretical construction rather than a direct phenomenon. This stark contrast highlights Hartmann's departure from Kant's view, as he refuses to equate the 'given' with mere sensory data, instead emphasizing its complex interplay with 'a priori'components.[23]

Hartmann's ethics fundamentally challenge Kant's hedonistic view, arguing that desire is driven by values, not pleasure. According to Hartmann, we desire objects because of their inherent value, such as their beauty, goodness, or truth, rather than solely because of the pleasure they may bring. This distinction is crucial, as values provide a sense of purpose and meaning, whereas pleasure is fleeting and subjective. For instance, a person may desire to help others, not because of the pleasure it brings, but because of the value they place on compassion and kindness. Similarly, an artist may create art, not for the pleasure of recognition, but for the value they see in self-expression and beauty. Hartmann contends that our 'will' is object-oriented, directed towards the value of things, rather than being driven by sensory pleasure or pain. This perspective shifts the focus from pleasure as the primary driver of desire to value as the fundamental motivator, highlighting the significance of values in shaping human behavior and decision-making. Hartmann says,

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"... is always a task, the aim itself, and indeed something concrete and material .... The content of the thing willed transports the person willing beyond himself; it causes him to lose himself in the object, in his idea, in his identification with the thing willed."[24]

b. Hartmann strongly criticizes Kant's narrow view that 'a priori' knowledge comes only from reason. He argues that Kant overlooks the crucial role of intuition in shaping our understanding of the world. Hartmann contends that intuition is the foundation of our knowledge, and rational judgment merely builds upon it. By challenging Kant's reasoning, Hartmann exposes the limitations of relying solely on reason to gain knowledge. Thus, Hartmann sums up:

"... the natural comprehension of the world of things is from the beginning permeated with aprioristic elements; all comprehension is accomplished in categorical structures, and precisely herein consists the apriority of the latter. Kant understood this relation very exactly; in regard to it the expression 'the condition of possible experience' is most instructive. Only the intellectualistic interpretation, the introduction of thought, of conception, of judgment, once again renders this great achievement ambiguous. In order to measure the extent of the transcendental conditionality, we must entirely disregard this interpretation."[25]

Thus, Hartmann's critique of Kant's intellectualism unmasks the flaws of a reason-centric approach to knowledge. By prioritizing intuition and non-conceptual understanding, Hartmann reveals the inadequacy of Kant's view, which neglects the vital role of pre-conceptual experience in shaping our grasp of reality. Hartmann's argument reshapes our understanding of knowledge, emphasizing the interdependence of intuition, experience, and reason. Ultimately, Hartmann's critique opens up new possibilities for understanding human knowledge, moving beyond the constraints of Kant's intellectualist framework.

Conclusion:

Nicolai Hartmann's critique fundamentally questions Kant's dominant influence on philosophy, especially ethics. He seeks to establish a material ethics that moves beyond Kant's formalism. While Hartmann's approach differs from Kant's, it is not a rejection but rather a thoughtful expansion of Kant's ideas, aiming to enrich our understanding of ethics.

Immanuel Kant's ethics has been criticized for neglecting the significance of emotions in morality. Nicolai Hartmann and Max Scheler argue that Kant failed to recognize the emotional nature of our primordial experience and the pre-theoretical understanding of values through emotional acts. In his effort to establish ethics on a non-sensible plane, Kant overlooks the complexity of emotional life, reducing it to a hedonistic conception. According to Kant, humans are driven by a natural inclination toward pleasure, and their will is determined by this inclination. Only the moral law, issued by pure practical reason, can supersede this natural inclination. However, even the non-sensible feeling of respect, which Kant

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acknowledges, lacks the power to determine our acts of 'willing.' This critique suggests that Kant's ethics overlook the integral role of emotions in shaping our moral experiences and decisions.

Hartmann argues that values are grasped through emotional acts of consciousness, which are distinct from mere feeling states. These emotional acts are intentional and directed toward values, allowing us to directly apprehend their essence. This process is pre-theoretical, meaning it occurs before rational reflection, and brings significance into consciousness without relying on instructions or symbols. Emotional consciousness grasps values as a unique reality, serving as a foundational act that underlies all judgments about 'goods' and 'actions.' In fact, all philosophical ethics rely on this primary discovery of values through emotional intuition, which precedes and informs secondary rational inquiry.

Hartmann and Scheler offer an innovative solution to the debate between absolutism and relativism. They argue that values are objective, yet our understanding of them is dynamic and context-dependent. According to Hartmann's 'searchlight' analogy, our intuition illuminates different values as circumstances change, leading to a shift in our moral perceptions. While values themselves remain constant, our consciousness of them evolves. This means that diverse societies and cultures can apprehend the same objective values from their unique perspectives, resulting in a rich and multifaceted understanding that balances universality and particularity.

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