

On Sources of Moral Obligation Kantian, Schlerian, and Confucian

This study intends to show three possible sources of moral obligation as seen from three perspectives: Kantian, Schelerian, and Confucian. I wish to prescind from discussing the objective source or sources of moral obligation such as culture or society and divine revelation. Instead, I want to concentrate and limit my discussion to the subjective source or sources of moral obligation: reason, emotion, or the Chinese "*hsin*". At the end of the discussion, I leave to my listeners and readers the judgement as to which perspective is closest to the Filipino experience of moral obligation.

At the outset, allow me to delineate moral obligation from other kinds of obligation such as cultural, societal, professional, and religious obligations. Moral obligation is such that it commands us to do the good (and to avoid evil) unconditionally. Undoubtedly, moral obligation finds its embodiment and overlaps in the other kinds of obligation, but moral obligation as such is unconditional absolute in its demand. It is an obligation that presupposes the freedom of man for it is only man who is morally obliged. That moral obligation is dialectically linked to the nature of man cannot be contested, but just what the nature of man is remains an open philosophical question. Whatever the subjective source of moral obligation reveals at the same time the essence of man as man.

KANTIAN SOURCE OF MORAL OBLIGATION

The opening lines of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* reads:

It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will.

The good will for Kant is the unconditional good; all other things, with intelligence, talents are only relatively good. Even happiness which for Aristotle constitutes man's ultimate *telos*, is still only relatively good since happiness is yet conditioned by a good will.

But what is a good will? Save for the holy will, a good will is one which acts for the sake of duty. Acting for the sake of duty is not quite the same as acting in accordance with duty, for one can perform one's duty out of fear (like fear of being caught and punished) or because of one's personal inclination. No moral goodness can be attributed to selling a kilo of rice within the limits set by the price control council because one is afraid of being caught overpricing. Neither it is morally good to continue breathing and preserving one's life because one is inclined to do so. For Kant, only the will is clearly acting for the sake of duty when there is a contrary inclination, an inclination to do otherwise than one's duty. In our example, if now the price control council is abolished and one is now inclined to sell the kilo of rice at an overprice but one sells it nevertheless at a reasonable price so as not to overburden the people, then we have a will acting for the sake of duty. Or, if for example, one encounters a big disappointment in life and now is inclined to take his own life but decides to continue living, then again we have a will acting for the sake of duty.

What is acting for the sake of duty? For Kant, it is acting out of reverence for the moral law that is universal. The goodness of an act does not lie in the result or consequence of the act but in the maxim, in the principle of determination of the action. A maxim is still subjective, material and a posteriori but when made objective, formal and a priori, then it becomes a principle. To act out of reverence for the moral law that is universal is to act such that I can make my subjective maxim into an objective principle. Thus,

we have Kant's categorical imperative which states that "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

What is so categorical about the categorical imperative? The categorical imperative is differentiated from the hypothetical ones, the problemative hypothetical and the assertoric hypothetical. The problematic hypothetical imperative merely commands an action in view of a possible purpose: "If I want to become rich, I ought to be hard working". The assertoric hypothetical imperative commands an action in view of an actual purpose: "All men desire to be happy, therefore we ought to do this or that." The hypothetical imperatives command the will to do acts that are means to an end, and as such the good that is commanded is a relative, conditioned, good. On the other hand, the categorical imperative is apodictic; it commands the good in itself, absolute and unconditioned. For Kant, only the categorical imperative can be said to be moral.

That the good will acts in accordance with the categorical imperative is for Kant a *synthetic a priori* kind of knowledge. By a *a priori* Kant means a knowledge that is characterized by universality and necessity. The *a priori* is opposed to the *a posteriori* which as the word suggests is posterior to, relative and dependent on sense experience. As for the synthetic, Kant means a judgement whose predicate is not contained in the subject. It is opposed to the analytic where the predicate is already contained in the subject and the judgement simply explicates what is already in the subject. For Kant, only the synthetic *a priori* knowledge is pure knowledge. Just as it is the task in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to show that possibility of pure theoretical knowledge, so it is the purpose of the *Critique of Practical Reason* to show possibility of pure practical knowledge, and such is the categorical imperative.

Epistemologically, Kant presumes that *a priori* is bestowed by reason. The noumenon or the thing-in-itself is never knowable; what we know is the phenomenon, the thing as it appears to the knower, and the phenomenon is constituted by the union of the noumenon with the *a priori* forms of sensibility and the categories of intelligence. Thus the Copernican Revolution in philosophy: the conformity of the object to the subject and not the other

way around. As far as the sensibility is concerned, Kant accepted Hume's view that without the unity and order imposed by the a priori forms of time and space, there is only the chaotic manifold sensible.

To return to the categorical imperative, Kant sees in it the universality and objectivity required of a pure unconditional moral knowledge. The unconditionality of moral obligation for Kant is based on logical ground -- reason itself provides this unconditionality. The premise is that no ethics based on man's physical needs and desires can be considered a priori, universal and necessary. Kant's objection to hypothetical imperatives is that they are based on empirical grounds and what is required of them is only skill, for "who wills the end, wills also the means which are indispensably necessary and in his power." Of course, we can see that the *Weltanschauung* of Kant's ethics is 18th century rationalism.

The unconditionality of moral obligation then is not to be found in the *matter* of human will, in the material content of the will's activity, but in the *form*, the formal element of volition. The matter of the will is conditioned by empirical experience, the material content being one's inclinations, passions and desires. No universality and objectivity can be attributed to inclination. But the categorical imperative contains the formal element of human volition; it commands that the subjective maxim be made into an objective principle, a universal law of nature. This formal element can only be given by reason.

It is difficult to follow Kant as he traces the source of the categorical imperative to reason, ending up with the more popular formulation of the categorical imperative in terms of man as an end. Briefly, Kant argues that if the good will is commanded to act in such a way that its maxim can be willed to be a universal objective principle, then clearly we have a synthetic a priori practical judgement: a priori because *every* will to be good must necessarily do so, synthetic because such a predicate is not contained in the concept of a good will. If there is such a synthetic a priori connection between the will and the categorical imperative, then there must be something that grounds the will and yet serve as its end at the same time, and this end cannot be relative but objective, the imperative being categorical and not hypothetical. That which is ground and end at the same time, an end-in-itself is

none other than man as reason. True, man is also subject to impulses and passions, but this is not what constitutes his being man. As person, man is rational, and as rational, he is not a subjective end but an objective end. Man as reason cannot be treated as a means. And so, the categorical imperative can be formulated as follows: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end."

Since the categorical imperative is grounded on reason, it follows that the human will is autonomous; it commands the law to itself. With reason as the source of moral obligation, Kant cannot help but postulate God, together with freedom and the immortality of the soul, to make some sense of man's moral life. God simply becomes a postulate of practical reason.

We can conclude this section with the observation that concomitant to Kant's emphasis on reason as the source of moral obligation is the bifurcation of experience into formal and material, into a priori and a posteriori knowledge. Added to this is the dualism of the phenomenon and the noumenon of thoughts and sensibility. We can also state that for Kant man is primarily reason, universal and objective.

SCHELERIAN SOURCE OF MORAL OBLIGATION

In the *Formulation in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values* Max Scheler not only criticizes Kant but also formulates his own kind of ethics.

Like Kant, Scheler rejects the ethics of goods and ends, for an ethics that makes the will dependent on the contingent reduces the value of good and evil to a mere technique, a skill in achieving what is deemed as good. According to Scheler, however, Kant made the mistake of reducing all material of the will to goods and ends and states. Kant assumed that moral obligation can only be discussed *formally* and the material content of man's volition is empirical and therefore conditional. Kant failed to see that goods and ends are grounded on *values* and that prior to an independence of the willing of a particular goal is a value-ception that influences the will to do so. Like Kant, Scheler wants an ethic that is founded on unconditional principles, but unlike Kant, he addresses his ethics to the material content of moral experience.

For Scheler, values form the material content of our moral experience. Values are different from goods and ends but underlie them. Goods and ends are contingent, changing and relative to man, but values are the *object* correlates of man's feelings. Picking up Pascal's insight that "the heart has reasons which reason itself does not know," Scheler points out that values are the true objects of intentional feeling; the mind is blind to them as the eye is blind to sounds. The *logique du coeur* is different from the logic of the mind, and just as there is a structure of knowing, so does the heart reveal an order of its own: intentional feeling is distinct from feeling-states and the feeling that merely accompanies the execution of striving. Intentional feeling intends values which are objective, immutable and eternal. Values are not dependent in their being on things, events, situation, people, although these can be *carriers* of value; through them values are realized. Things, events, situation, people may change and disappear but values remain as values. They do not exist, however, in a separate realm similar to Plato's world of ideas since they are true correlates of man's feelings. Values are subjective in their *feelability* but objective in their *being*.

For Scheler, our primordial contact with the world is through feeling. Prior to the relationship of knowing is value-ing, preferring. Before the child knows the candy to be "sweet" and the medicine "bitter", he already "knows" the candy to be "nice" and "pleasant" and the medicine "bad" and "unpleasant". My knowing a person as he is preceded by my loving or hating him, or better, it is through loving that I come to know him as he truly is.

Loving and hating are the primary acts of man as person. Through these acts, an *a priori* hierarchy of values is revealed to man. Love is the movement towards the realization of higher values whereas hate is the movement in the direction towards lower values. Lowest in the rank of values are the positive value "pleasant" and the negative value "unpleasant". Next in the rank are vital values that pertain to the general well-being of man. Higher than these values are the spiritual values: the beautiful and the ugly, justice and injustice, truth and falsehood. The highest values are the values of the holy and the unholy. How do we know that a value is higher than another? Scheler gives five characteristics by which a value is higher than another: 1) endurability, 2) less divisibility, 3) ability to generate and found other values, 4) depth of fulfillment, and 5) less relativity to absolute values. For

Scheler, the first four characteristics are not evidence for the hierarchy of values because the ranks of values in their order are given in immediate feeling, not in any ethical judgement or reflection. The last characteristic is the basis of *a priori* alogical value-ception because it is the absolute values which are given in pure feeling. In other words, value or its hierarchy cannot be abstracted logically as a common property of things. Values are given immediately in *intuition*.

The moral values of good and evil are not part of the hierarchy of values because for Scheler, good and evil simply "ride on the back of the deed". The deed itself can not be said to be good or evil; it is good when it realizes a higher value in preference to a lower one or when it realizes a positive value instead of a negative one, and it is evil when it realizes a lower value in preference to a higher one or when it realizes a negative value instead of a positive one. It is in this sense that ethics for Scheler can be material and not formal, for clearly the content of human volition is the objective hierarchy of values at the back of the deed itself.

In what sense then can we speak of moral obligation? In what sense can moral obligation be unconditional and *a priori*? For Scheler, the moral ought-to-do is derived from the moral ought-to-be from the call of value. Value has an attracting pull; it calls on man to realize it personally and freely, it demands to *be*. Because it demands to be, man ought to realize it, to act on it. In a given situation, higher and positive values ought to be preferred than lower and negative ones. The unconditionality of moral obligation is ultimately based on the objectivity of values and their rank-order. Their objectivity can be attested by the fact that when one fails to realize a value, he experiences a sense of guilt, his humanity is somehow shaken up if not destroyed, but the value remains a value.

But values and their rank-order are given immediately in intuition; they are objects of man's feelings. The source then of moral obligation for Scheler is the heart rather than reason. The *a priori* acquires a new meaning besides being universal and necessary — it is also the immediate, the primordial, the intuitive, the given. In fact, for Scheler, the *a priori* can be concrete and particular. For example, the ethical genius can feel an objective value to be realized that others have not felt as yet. Scheler's *a priori* is the phenomeno-

logical essence of the eidetic reduction applied to the heart by a desymbolization of natural experience performed by the *epoche*. The epistemological background is thus the phenomenological world which allows no dichotomy between noumenon and phenomenon for everything given in consciousness is phenomenon and therefore knowable and worth attending to.

That Scheler should focus his ethics on the heart is understandable from his view of man as primarily spirit or person and not just psyche. As psyche, man participates in the activities of beings lower than him. But as spirit, man is self-conscious and conscious of the world, he is able to intuit essence from existence and most important he is an "ens amans". That man is a loving being is for Scheler the unique characteristic of man as person.

Within the framework of Scheler's a priori material ethics, God is not simply a logical postulate. God is the Absolute Value, the highest value in the hierarchy of values. And anyone who truly loves cannot help but move in the direction towards Him. The call to realize value is ultimately the call of the Absolute.

In Scheler's ethics, a pure ought, an ought that rests on itself, is impossible. Moral obligation does not rest on itself but on the content of the will, the values that call man to realize them. It is not *how* the will wills but *what* values the will wills that provides the moral dimension of experience, for underlying the question of what ought I to do is the question of what values ought I to see and realize. Even the categorical imperative itself can be the content of willing, and it would seem then that formal ethics can be reduced to the material.

But was Scheler able to dissolve the distinction between material and formal ethics? Hardly. In his system, a dualism still exists, a dualism between reason and emotion, between vital values and spiritual ones.

CONFUCIAN SOURCE OF MORAL OBLIGATION

Confucius said, "T'san, there is one thread that runs through my doctrines." Tseng Tzu said, "Yes." After Confucius had left,

the disciples asked him, "What did he mean?" Tseng Tzu replied, "The Way of our Master is non other than conscientiousness (*chung*) and altruism (*shu*)." (*Analects* 4:15)

The whole of Confucian moral teachings can be summed up in these two Chinese words *chung* and *shu*. *Chung* means fidelity, loyalty to one self and *shu* means the Golden Rule, "Do not do unto others what you would not want others to do unto to you." These comprise the two aspects of the primary Confucian virtue of *jen* translated as benevolence, human-heartedness, kindness, love. By no means should these two be separated otherwise the objection of Kant to the Golden Rule being a principle would be *valid*:

Let no one think that here the trivial '*quod tibi non vis fieri, etc.*' can serve as a standard or principle. For it is merely derivative from our principle, although subject to various qualifications: it cannot be a universal law since it contains the ground neither of duties to oneself nor of duties of kindness to others (for many a man would readily agree that others should not help him if only he could be dispensed from affording help to them), nor finally of strict duties towards others; for on this basis the criminal would be able to dispute with judges who punish him, and so on. (Groundwork, p. 97, footnote)

Obviously, Kant was unaware of the other side of the Golden Rule which is *chung*, fidelity to oneself. If one is sincere to oneself, one would wish others to help him; and in the case of the criminal he would wish to be punished for his crime.

But what is the source and foundation of this moral obligation to oneself and to others? From whence does the obligation to love emanate?

Confucius said, "By nature men are alike. Through practice they have become far apart." (*Analects*, 17:2) Confucius did not explicitly specify what is man's nature, although he emphasized undoubtedly the universality and equality of man's being. It is left to his disciple Mencius to elaborate and explicitate that man's nature is basically good.

If you let people follow their feelings (original nature), they will be able to do good. This is what is meant by saying that human nature is good. If man does evil, it is the fault of his natural endowment. The feeling of commiseration is found in all men; the feeling of shame and dislike is found in all men; the feeling of respect and reverence is found in all men; and the feeling of right and wrong is found in all men. (*Mencius* 6A:6)

The moral sense of man comes from the very nature of man as basically good and if a man becomes evil, it is not because of his natural endowment but because of the influences of his environment (allegory of the Bull Mountain). Mencius is aware of the strong shaping influences of one's environment on his moral character, yet he believes that there is something in man which cannot be subject to external control, which is neither learned nor acquired and is endowed by Heaven:

What a man is capable of doing without learning is his good ability (*liang-neng*). What a man knows without deliberation is his good knowledge (*liang-chih*). No child does not know love for his parents. When he grows up, no child loves one's parents in benevolence (*jen*). To respect elders is righteousness (*i*). They are principles (*li*) which are universally present in all men under heaven. (*Mencius* 7A:15)

Liang-chih is the Confucian concept of conscience. *Liang-chih* literally means "good knowledge". It is the knowledge of the good, of the principles underlying interhuman relationships. In short, it is the moral sense of man and it is the substance of man's *hsin*.

Hsin literally means "heart" but which has been half-correctly translated by commentators as "mind". More accurately it is "mind-heart". *Hsin* is mind because for the Chinese mind acts not only in terms of thinking and perception but also in terms of feelings and desires. *Hsin* is heart because heart refers to that center of man's being, the source of all his conscious and moral activity, the meeting point of intellect and will.

How does Mencius argue of the irreducibility of *liang-chih* and the innate goodness of human nature? He says:

"All men have the mind which cannot bear to see the suffer-

ing of others. . . When I say that all men have the mind which cannot bear to see the suffering of others, my meaning may be illustrated thus: Now, when men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they all have a feeling of alarm and distress, not to gain friendship with the child's parents, nor to seek the praise of their neighbors and friends, nor because they dislike the reputation of lack of humanity if they did not rescue the child". (*Mencius* 7B)

We can say that Mencius' appeal is both intuitive and empirical.

Thus, the Confucian source of moral obligation is *hsin*, the mind-heart, and as such the moral sense in man is both intuitive and empirical. And yet, by no means is the unconditionality of moral obligation lost because *all* men have this moral sense and it constitutes man's humanity.

If the Confucian source of moral obligation is the mind-heart, then it follows that Confucian ethics is neither formal nor material but both. This can be seen in the concept *chih-liang-chih* of the 16th century Neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yang-ming. *Chih-liang-chih* means the extension of the innate knowledge of the good. According to Wang, *liang-chih* does not have a substance of its own; its substance is *li*, principle. But principles are not found in things or affairs but in *hsin*, mind-heart, as it interacts with others. The principle of filial piety does not exist outside in the father but arises as my *hsin* obeys my father, as I extend my innate knowledge of the good. *Liang-chih* cannot be divorced from concrete situations, and yet in itself, it already contains the principle, the good.

Underlying the extension of *liang-chih* is of course the optimistic belief in ability of man to judge correctly what is good, the faith in the innate goodness of human nature. This does not erase the possibility of man to do evil, to be inhuman and not faithful to one's original self. Man can still be inhuman. But what is important therefore is for man to cultivate, nourish, preserve his original *hsin*. And if he is able to do that, then he is said to be one with *Tao*, the moral way, and one with Heaven which in the first place endowed him with such nature. In the Confucian Context, there is no need to postulate Heaven to make some sense of the moral life, for Heaven is the

ultimate source of man's *liang-chih* and *hsin* and the ultimate end of the cultivation of his mind-heart.

Which of the three systems is most relevant and closest to the Filipino experience? "Saan ba tumatawag ang budhi sa atin? Sa ating kaisipan? Sa ating damdamin? Sa ating kalooban? Hayaan ko kayong bumalik sa inyong karanasang moral at sumagot".

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