



Juxtaposition of Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche and Hannah Arendt's Conceptions of Will: It's ethical Implications

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Action is a constituent of existence which is so axiomatic. In the human sphere, action has been affected by the sophistication and complexity of man, hence the avalanche of issues which spring from it. This is underscored by its reverberation on human-to-human relationships wherein it plays a central role. The right and wrong dual possibilities of human actions have often elicited interest in the scrutiny of human will, given its proximity to human actions. Although Hannah Arendt's fascination about and consequent investigation of the will as a concept provides us pertinent information about its role in human acts, it is noteworthy that her predecessors in the persons of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche were also entangled in the "will" discourse. Thus, this paper argues that placing their views side by side enlarges our cognitive horizon bordering on the will and somewhat harmonizes the opposing ethical viewpoints of consequentialism and inconsequentialism, which mirrors the ethical implications.

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ABSTRACT

Action is a constituent of existence which is so axiomatic. In the human sphere, action has been affected by the sophistication and complexity of man, hence the avalanche of issues which spring from it. This is underscored by its reverberation on human-to-human relationships wherein it plays a central role. The right and wrong dual possibilities of human actions have often elicited interest in the scrutiny of human will, given its proximity to human actions. Although Hannah Arendt's fascination about and consequent investigation of the will as a concept provides us pertinent information about its role in human acts, it is noteworthy that her predecessors in the persons of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche were also entangled in the "will" discourse. Thus, this paper argues that placing their views side by side enlarges our cognitive horizon bordering on the will and somewhat harmonizes the opposing ethical viewpoints of consequentialism and inconsequentialism, which mirrors the ethical implications.

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INTRODUCTION

The consensus by most philosophers that man is a moral being has given rise to the postulations of numerous ethical theories that seek to x-ray this aspect of man's nature, and prescribe ways that it can be maximized. The absence of unanimity over which one should be subscribed to has persisted from the ancient epoch to this present epoch. Although there have been eras where a particular ethical orientation held sway, observation says this changes with the inception of another era. Questions posed about the basis or source of moral precepts have become problematic with the myriad of answers proffered. God, reason, feeling, happiness, the generality of people, and so on, have been highlighted by varied philosophers as a *sine qua non* for any valid ethical exposition. In the ancient period, there was the prevalent belief that a man who optimizes his rational faculty is bound to live a moral life. The Socratic dictum "An unexamined life is not worth living" sheds light on how a way of life subjected to examination with a rational microscope translates to one worth living. His exemplification of virtue knowable through reason till the point of death sends a strong message.

Contrarily, the medieval period aggressively underlined God as the nucleus of ethical consideration, hinging moral goodness on adherence to revealed divine principles. Philosophers in subsequent eras oscillated between these two bases amidst the ground-breaking achievements being made in the intellectual world. Even with the plethora of ethical philosophies on display, it is pertinent to state that a handful had the rigor associated with Immanuel Kant's ethics that continues to influence lives to this day. His Copernican-like intervention/contribution to epistemology revolutionized the intellectual world, thus initiating a new conception of the cognitive process which extended to moral philosophy. He understood will in terms of the "goodwill" which he made the pivot on which his moral theory revolves. Also, Friedrich Nietzsche, in a somewhat distinct way, through his idea of will to power crystallized the influence of the will on human actions. In the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt *inter alia* interposed in this discourse by portraying the connection of will to thinking and judging, which are precursors to human acts. Their views will have an import to contrasting currents of consequentialism and inconsequentialism which often flow beneath ethical postulations. Therefore, it is this work's focal point to attempt to facilitate a reconciliation of these schools of thought, which would aid create symmetry—to some extent—between intention and action in matters of moral evaluation.



KANT AND PRACTICAL REASON AS THE FACILITATOR OF THE GOODWILL

Not too long after ingeniously addressing fundamental metaphysical and epistemological issues in philosophy, Kant extended his intellectual therapy to ethics. The nexus between theoretical and practical reason is prominent in that they are part and parcel of pure reason, and not essentially different from each other. In his Critique of Practical Reason, Immanuel Kant expatiated on this aspect of man's reason that resonates on his co-existence with other men. He pointed out that practical reason is significantly responsible for conscientiousness in social relations. Reason in this sense is practical as it is directly related to palpable human actions. And for this to be possible, having the leeway to do so is very pertinent. In other words, Dudley (2007:32) noted thus:

Its primary aim is to show that the human will is capable of being determined by pure reason, that reason alone can be practical in the sense that it can set ends and motivate us to pursue them. Kant equates such rational determination of the will with freedom, and thus with the capacity for moral agency, because it amounts to self-determining, rather than being determined by external conditions and forces for which we are not responsible.

This implies that the will plays a crucial role in human living, for it constitutes the crux of human actions. It enables one to contrive a clear-cut goal and accordingly work towards its attainment. The optimal functionality of the will is premised on the affirmation of freedom. Freedom is the absence of coercion, compulsion, or unsolicited external influences. Freedom, Kant maintained, is a precondition for morality and its associated actions. Although he took cognizance of the deterministic status-quo in the natural world, Kant underlined the salience of juxtaposing freedom with the human person. However, freedom is no phenomenon enveloped by the mental faculties. It subsists in the noumenal realm and is not experientially knowable like other objects in the world. Freedom is a regulative idea of pure reason that distinguishes man from other existents.

Since man is capable of willing in an atmosphere of freedom, how then can he be able to carry out morally good actions? For Kant, this is enabled by practical reason which brings about the good will. "Just as our theoretical reason brings the category of causality to visible objects and thereby explains the process of change, so also the practical reason brings to any given moral situation the concept of duty, or ought" (Stumpf, 1994). Having a strong sense of duty, for Kant, is the hallmark of goodwill. It entails doing that which is appropriate or right, discerned through reason, just for the sake of it. Thus, attention is not necessarily paid to the rewards or punishment of acting or not acting morally. For example, consider a scenario



where a corporate body's accountant oversees cash inflow and outflow therein, with a monthly average pay. With the huge sums of money regularly in his custody and the notoriety of some of his superiors for their fraudulent activities, he declines complicity as well as insists on accountability. He does this without an expectation of eulogy or fear of comeuppance, but because it behooves him to do so. Immanuel Kant would label this accountant's action moral due to the dutifulness that underlies it.

Regardless of the outcome of human actions, what matters is the will of a good nature. Sometimes, the effects of actions of such origin could be unpleasant but this is not as relevant as its source. Thus, the moral value of a human action is not determined by its consequences, instead by its motive or intention. This epitomizes the ethical notion of inconsequentialism or deontological ethics. Premium placed on the "will" by Kant in his entire ethical theory portrayed the focal role it plays in human existence. And this can be aptly regarded as a prelude to the philosophies of later thinkers, like Friedrich Nietzsche and Hannah Arendt, which revolved round the concept of will.

NIETZSCHE AND THE WILL TO POWER VIS-À-VIS HUMAN WILL

Existentialism is a famous important school of thought in philosophy, particularly by virtue of its advocacy for the emboldening of man's intrinsic nature. This quest was the focal point of Friedrich Nietzsche's intellectual exploits, especially in his *magnum opus*, *The Will to Power*. Like Immanuel Kant, his discourse on epistemology somewhat engendered his ethical viewpoint. But unlike Kant, Nietzsche avowed the non-existence of objective knowledge due to the inherent propensity in man to make interpretations from a subjective perspective. In this way, there are no a priori epistemic contents that can be alluded to. This gave rise to his radical perspectivism which means "there are no uninterpreted facts or truths, for everything we encounter is seen from one perspective or another" (Lawhead, 2002:418).

Nietzsche's disposition to objectivity stretched to his appraisal of morality-related issues. He argued that there are no objective values which man ought to abide by. He downplayed the capacity of reason to produce such and subordinated it to human emotion or feeling. This is the very thrust of nihilism. Thus, man is saddled with responsibility of fashioning his own values as instigated by his feelings, thereby not subscribing to the idea of an enduring touchstone of living instituted by a Supreme Being known as God. In this feeling or instinctual inclination, Nietzsche opines, lies a drive to overcome, to dominate my environment, to make my personal mark on the world, to create, to express myself. It is what he calls the will to power (Lawhead, 2007). This unique constituent in man (will to



power) impinges man's will, thereby enabling him personally develop self-sustaining goals and achieve them. It is this kernel of the human species which propels them to assert themselves in existence and make a tangible difference. For Nietzsche, this underlies every human action including scholarly activities. He believed that intellectuals were not only motivated by the expansion of our supposed knowledge gamut, but also by the irresistible impulse to accentuate themselves.

Furthermore, Nietzsche contended that the will to power is responsible for morally good actions which emanate from adopting a "master morality" that is opposed to a "slave morality" which de-emphasizes this prominent element of man. In the dissection of the "will" in Kant and Nietzsche, there is actually a point of convergence and divergence. The former is visible in their agreement that the will paves way for the conception cum realization of one's intentions; human actions flow from willing. Whereas the latter is evident in their disagreement about what should impinge the will, as Kant and Nietzsche proposed reason and emotion respectively. That is to say, the human will is crucial for human actions, including ones that are wholesome and rich with positive benefits. Nietzsche went on to underline the will to power as the rudimentary force in Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, for it is exerted by the fittest that survives in the natural selection process. Affirming the profound possibility of humans fully engaging their will to power, he noted that this would be more apprehensible in the "Übermensch" (overman or superman) who would exhibit all the traits and behaviors appropriate for the human species; a fulfilled person that comprises the Roman Caesar and Christ's soul. As he drew the curtain in the aforementioned influential work of his, Nietzsche (1967:550) reiterated thus:

Do you want a name for this world? A solution for all its riddles? A light for you, too, you best-concealed, strongest, most intrepid, most midnightly men?—This world is the will to power—and nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides.

In this manner, Nietzsche provides a synopsis of his discussion on the will to power. For him, it is the be-all and end-all of mankind. Thus, there is a close connection between the will to power as the predominant ontological constituent of reality and the human will, since the latter is amenable to the former *ceteris paribus*.

ARENDT'S NOTION OF THE WILL

Hannah Arendt's entire philosophy cannot be isolated from her chequered socio-political experiences in the past riddled with racism at the hands of the German Nazis. Her Jewish origin made her alongside other Jews victims of segregation, repression, and extermination. Arendt's seminal work *Origins of Totalitarianism* examined that status-quo, attracted commendation and condemnation, and subtly influenced her subsequent works like *Eichmann in*



Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil and The Life of the Mind. Her decision to witness the trial of Adolf Eichmann—the henchman of Anti-Semitism—piqued her interest in the discourse on the intricacies of evil or wrong actions, which expectedly alluded to the human will.

Arendt, in her seminal work, *Life of the Mind*, understood and explained the will in two basic ways: First, will as the dimension in the human person that harbors freedom. It is this freedom that properly endues actions proceeding from the human agent with a moral value that could warrant the moral judgment of either good or bad. Thus, the will is that capacity in man which provides him the freedom or leeway to choose between alternatives; opting for one alternative presupposes the possibility of settling for the other if desired. Thus:

As I have said more than once, the touchstone of a free act—from the decision to get out of bed in the morning or take a walk in the afternoon to the highest resolutions by which we bind ourselves for the future—is always that we know that we could also have left undone what we actually did” (Arendt, 1978:26).

Arendt regarded this conception of will as “*liberum arbitrium*.” In other words, the will chiefly provides us flexibility in such a manner that one can decide to act in one way or the other without compulsion. For instance, consider a pretty young lady in her early twenties that participates in a beauty pageant, say annual Most Beautiful Girl in Nigeria (MBGN). The execution of this intention, in view of the currently examined interpretation of the will, is essentially a net-result of her will and the lady could as well have overlooked or declined the chance to participate if she deemed fit.

Second, will as the dimension in the human person that is preoccupied with engineering or facilitating a novel series of actions or events. This is the will playing a creative role in the life of an individual, as it enables him/her to envisage the undertaking of projects and midwife new experiences. Hannah Arendt refers to it as an “organ of the future,” implying that the will initiates actions, as a matter of functionality. To make this point perspicuous, Arendt contrasts the activity involved in the will—willing—with thinking. While noting both as mental acts, she reckoned that they varied from each other. Thinking, she explains, deals with bringing past experiences to one’s present consciousness in the course of assessing or pondering over thoughts in the mind wherein there is zero precipitation of new events; whereas willing is forward-bound as it paves way for projects, new events, and initiates fresh activities. A good example of this sort of willingness can be seen in former president Lee Kuan Yew’s transformation of Singapore from a third-world country to a first-world country. This action of his can, in this view of the will, be said to have been spearheaded by the will, hence the evident change. As regards these conceptions of the will, Arendt (1978:156) affirms that:



In my discussion of the Will I have repeatedly mentioned two altogether different ways of understanding the faculty; as a faculty of choice between objects or goals, the *liberumarbitrium*, which acts as arbiter between given ends and deliberates freely about means to reach them; and, on the other hand, as our "faculty for beginning spontaneously a series in time"(Kant) or Augustine's "*initium uteset homo creatuses* " man's capacity for beginning because he himself is a beginning.

Interestingly, the will's mediation between thoughts and actions underlines its crucial role to the human subject, with import to the exhibition of his/her political tendencies. This is so in that it facilitates the accentuation of each individual's political power. While shedding light on the constituents of *vita activa*, In his work *Portable Hannah Arendt*, Peter Baehr (2000:xxix) points out that "the third fundamental activity that Arendt considers is that of 'action,' for her the quintessentially political capacity. By action, Arendt understands the ability of humans to initiate a new course of events. Action realizes the human potential for freedom, albeit under conditions of 'plurality,' that is the existence of diverse human agents in front of whom the action takes place and whose presence confers on it some meaning." If action is the ability to initiate fresh events, it follows that the will underpins this. However, it is pertinent at this juncture to explore the ethical implications of Kant, Nietzsche, and Arendt's construal of the human will.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE OBJECT OF MORAL JUDGMENT

The thrust of ethics lies in its concern with the evaluation of human conduct for the purpose of determining whether it is right or wrong. As straightforward as this task may seem, it has not been bereft of problems. There is a controversy over what the focal point of moral judgments or evaluations should be. Since human acts, which proceed from the human person in a deliberate fashion, are a composition of intention and action, the question of which of the two should be cardinally considered in assigning moral labels has been nothing short of problematic, which consequently gives rise to opposing viewpoints of consequentialism and inconsequentialism.

Lawhead (2007) explains consequentialism (teleological ethics) as an "ethical theory that defines moral rightness or wrongness in terms of the desirability or undesirability of an action's consequences"; whereas inconsequentialism (deontological ethics) "defines the moral rightness or wrongness of an act in terms of the intrinsic value of the act. According to this theory, our duty to perform an action (or to refrain from doing it) is based on the nature of the act itself and not on its consequences" (Lawhead, 2007:578). Thus, while consequentialism gravitates toward assessment of the deliberate, non-compulsive action of a human agent,



inconsequentialism concerns itself with the intention which yielded that action. But how is the human will involved? The will is central in that the freedom which inheres in it—hence free will—alongside the intellect, by virtue of their presence, furnishes actions springing from man (human acts) with moral value. Onuoha (2007:20) underscores this by arguing that “human act therefore are those actions that proceed from the intellect and freewill. They can be regarded as personal acts. Morality deals with what man does voluntarily.”

In view of the foregoing, Immanuel Kant’s construal of the will in terms of the “goodwill” directs the microscope of ethics toward intention in labeling human actions either right or wrong. This is emphasized by his “categorical imperatives” which is tailored to the regulation of human conduct from within. Its consequence in the moral sphere is that the moral value of any human act is largely dependent on the motive underlying it. The relevance of this evaluative approach is palpable in self-defense. Although murder and self-defense have a similar end evident in the taking of a life, they differ from each other by virtue of the motives behind them. While the motive for the former is mostly premeditated, the motive for the latter is borne out of a desire to protect one’s life by resisting an assailant. This attention paid to intention in this case would very likely earn self-defense an affirmative moral label. Also, Friedrich Nietzsche seems to base the moral quality of human actions within due to his emphasis on the all-encompassing nature of the will to power, which impinges the human will, too. Thus, the appropriateness or inappropriateness of a human action is premised on its underlying intention to express the drive to surpass oneself, hence his renowned distinction between “master morality” and “slave/herd morality.”

Furthermore, Hannah Arendt’s discourse on the human will resonates on the consequence of an act as the basis for moral judgment. In her dual interpretations of the will, the import of a human action is apparently situated in the choosing between available alternatives and kick-starting of a new course of events. These propensities of the will are perceptible in her notion of plurality. Thus, the moral value of a human act is mostly dependent on action per se. An instance of Arendt’s consequentialist orientation is seen in her criticism of Hitler’s anti-Semitic totalitarian regime in Germany, which reached its crescendo in the late 1930s and led to the wanton killing of deluge of Jews, as wrong and evil in her work *Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Apparently, placing side by side Kant, Nietzsche, and Arendt’s notions on the will somewhat resolves the problem of what the primary object of moral judgment should be and enables a reconciliation of inconsequentialism and consequentialism. While the duo of Kant and Nietzsche harp on intention within, Arendt stresses action without. The will’s mediation embodies that reconciliatory touch. Well, this paper’s



gritty but apposite attempt may generate reservations about the possibility of harmonization of some sort. However, It is worth reiterating that the human will, in this case, paves way for this reconciliation in the sense that it is capable of influencing intention (by conceiving a new course of events) and action (by initiating and facilitating its execution).

CONCLUSION

Amongst the diverse dimensions in man with significance to ethics, the will has considerably occupied a prominent place, especially in relation to the concept of freedom and moral value of human actions. The fundamentality of will as a pivotal subject has seen distinguished philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Hannah Arendt attempt to do justice to it. While Kant and Nietzsche construed the will in terms of a good will and one susceptible to the will to power respectively which are suggestive of inconsequentialism, Arendt exposed us to the bifocal senses of the will as a liberum arbitrium and an organ of the future which tilts toward consequentialism. Her exposition on will as a mental act and a precursor to action brings to the fore its connection to plurality, which reflects both freedom and initiation of a new course of events. These philosophers' views on the will—to some extent—reconciles consequentialism and inconsequentialism due to the common thread of will which runs through and holds both ethical viewpoints.



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