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Kant's Doctrine of the Categories: Some Questions and Problems

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Kant's doctrine of categories is well known and it may seem too late in the day to raise any new problem or questions about it. Yet, the power and fecundity of a great thinker perhaps consists in that it can challenge anew and arouse the reader from the dogmatic somnambulism that is the consequence of the way he has been taught the thought of a great thinker.

Kant's doctrine of categories is *not* 'independent' of his doctrine of judgement. Kant, it should be remembered, articulates first his thought about the subject in his 'table of judgements' and then, later, develops his doctrine of categories in his 'table' of categories. The latter, therefore, may be taken as 'founded' in the former and 'deriving' its specificity and content from the former.

The 'table of judgements', as given in the *Critique of Pure Reason*¹ is the following:

1. *Quantity*: Universal, Particular, Singular
2. *Quality*: Affirmative, Negative, Infinite
3. *Relation*: Categorical, Hypothetical, Disjunctive
4. *Modality*: Problematic, Assertoric, Apodeictic (p. 107)

The 'table of categories', on the other hand as given by Kant is the following:

1. Of quantity — Unity, Plurality, Totality.
2. Of quality — Reality, Negation, Limitation.
3. Of relation — Of Inherence and Subsistence
Of Causality and Dependence
Of Community (reciprocity between agent and patient).
4. Of modality — Possibility—Impossibility
Existence—Non-existence
Necessity—Contingency. (ibid., 113)

The two may be correlated in the following way:

1. *Quantity*:

Universal	—	Unity
Particular	—	Plurality
Singular	—	Totality
2. *Quality*:

Affirmative	—	Reality
Negative	—	Negation
Infinite	—	Limitation
3. *Relation*:

Categorical	—	Of Inherence and Subsistence (<i>substantia accidentet</i>)
Hypothetical	—	Of Causality and Dependence (<i>cause and effect</i>)
Disjunctive	—	Of Community (reciprocity between agent and patient)
4. *Modality*:

Problematic	—	Possibility—Impossibility
Assertoric	—	Existence—Non-existence
Apodeictic	—	Necessity—Contingency

A comparison of the two tables reveals problems which do not seem to have been paid sufficient attention for, if they had been attended to, serious questions would have been raised about Kant's doctrine of the categories. Even a cursory glance at the two tables suggests that it is the concepts of quantity, quality, relation and modality that appear to be more fundamental as it is under these that sub-classifications have been made in both the 'table of judgements' and the 'table of categories'. *Prima facie*, it is the 'table of judgements' which is more fundamental, as in Kant's own sequence the 'table of categories' is derived from it and there seems to be some sort of correlation between the two. Yet, a closer examination reveals problems and does not, *prima facie*, sustain the notion of categories as they have usually been understood in the context of Kantian philosophy.

The correlation between the category of 'unity' and that which is called 'universal' in the 'table of judgement', under 'quantity' is strange as even if a 'universal' judgement is taken as uniting the plurality or multiplicity under it, it does not do so either by destroying or denying the differences

and is, in fact, something that sums up in an additive sense, if the term 'universal' is taken to mean that which is conveyed by the term 'all' in the context of such judgements. 'All', it should be remembered, is of two types: one, where it is the result of an enumerative induction which however large, is still denumerably finite. The other which is a real 'infinity' suffers from all the problems of definition first and second, of induction. In both cases the 'all', as it quantifies the subject of a proposition, conveys the sense of a 'totality' and not of 'unity'. It is an aggregate or collection of single individuals who have been unified into a class by being brought together under it.

This, it may be said, is to take an extentional view of 'all' and not to see it as determined by connotation or property by virtue of which those individuals have been brought into togetherness in the class. This, however, would be to treat the term 'universal' not as quantifying the subject in a judgement, but to treat it as something analogous to a Platonic idea or a *jāti* in the Nyāya sense where the 'universal' is more real than the individuals which 'illustrate' or 'imitate' or 'participate' in it. As Kant is self-consciously obtaining his 'table of categories' on the basis of his 'table of judgements' he cannot treat the universal judgement under the heading of 'quantity' in the sense in which Plato used it.

The same problem seems to arise with his category of 'totality' which is the correlate of what is termed as 'singular' in the 'table of judgements'. To think of an individual as consisting of a 'totality' is not to see him/her as an individual for, to be an individual is not to be an aggregate of parts, but to have a unity which is not only over and above these but permeates them in an essential sense.

The division under 'quality' seems to raise a slightly different problem as, though there can hardly be any question regarding the correlation between the 'table of judgements' and the 'table of categories', in this case, there seems little justification for the nomenclature of the categories that have been given for them. There seems hardly any justification, for example, for the category of 'limitation' which itself is supposed to be correlated with what has been called in Kemp Smith's translation as 'infinite' in the 'table of judgements'. The German original for this is 'unendlich'. The term 'infinite' is very strange as it does not occur in the usual 'table of judgements'. Kant in his explication of the characterization has taken recourse to what in traditional logic was used as a technique or 'trick' for converting or changing a negative proposition into an affirmative

one. His own example is, 'The soul is not-mortal' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 108). Kant's reason for calling it 'infinite' in his own words is as follows:

Since the mortal constitutes one part of the whole extension of possible beings, and the non-mortal the other, nothing more is said by my proposition than that the soul is one of the infinite number of things which remain over when I take away all that is mortal (ibid.: 108).

The reason for calling the correlate category as 'limitation' under the heading 'quality' is, in Kant's own words, 'The infinite sphere of all that is possible is thereby only so far limited that the mortal is excluded from it, and the soul is located in the remaining part of its extension' (ibid.: 108). But a category of understanding in Kant, as usually understood, is that which *inevitably* functions in the process of understanding as the activity of 'understanding' itself is constituted by it. But if it is so, it does not seem, at least *prima facie*, that the category of 'limitation' occurs in this way in all acts of understanding as, normally, one seldom says that 'Soul is not-mortal'.

There is an additional problem in respect of what Kant has called 'Reality' which corresponds to 'affirmation' in the 'table of judgements'. If 'Reality' is the category that corresponds to 'affirmation' then it is 'unreality' that should correspond to that which is called 'negative' in the 'table of judgements'. It is the dichotomy 'real-unreal' which should correspond to that which is conveyed by 'affirmative-negative' in the 'table of judgements'. But it is not so. What corresponds to negative judgement is not 'reality' but negation in the 'table of categories'. That Kant is not averse to such dichotomous characterization is evident in his formulation of the categories under the headings of 'relation' and 'modality'. Under the former, he gives the following dichotomous divisions: substance-accident, cause-effect, and community (reciprocity between agent and patient). Under the latter, he gives 'possibility-impossibility', 'existence non-existence' and 'necessity-contingency'. Each of these dichotomies raises problems specific to itself, but the central issue that it raises for the notion of category is that, in case it is taken seriously, the category itself will have to be conceived as essentially 'dichotomous' in character. This, if accepted, will affect the nature of 'understanding' or thinking which would then necessarily have to be dichotomous in character.

Kant himself, in his discussion of categories, has complicated the subject by distinguishing between categories of 'quantity' and 'quality' on the one hand, and those of 'relation' and 'modality' on the other. Not only this, he has distinguished between general and transcendental logic and has suggested that as far as the latter is concerned, it is the third category which is important as it synthesizes in itself the other two which belong to the general logic alone. This, if accepted, would result in their being *only* four categories under the four headings as the other ones will be synthesized within these. There would then only remain the categories of totality, limitation, 'reciprocity' between agent and patient or 'community' and 'necessity-contingency'.

Kant's own observations in this connection are interesting; he writes, Further, it may be observed that the third category in each class always arises from the combination of the second category with the first.

Thus *allness* or *totality* is just plurality considered as unity; *limitation* is simply reality combined with negation; *community* is the causality of substances reciprocally determining one another; lastly, *necessity* is just the existence which is given through possibility itself (ibid., 116).

This reminds one of Hegel where the third term in the triad is supposed to be the synthesis of the thesis and the anti-thesis which are successive positions which thought inevitably takes in its movement. Kant, it should be remembered, also uses the term 'dynamical' to indicate the distinction between the categories under the headings of 'relation' and 'modality' from those under 'quality' and 'quantity' which he calls 'mathematical'. This division between the categories of 'quality' and 'quantity' on the one hand and those of 'relation' and 'modality' on the other plays havoc with Kant's notion of the category as, in principle, there can be no distinction between categories which renders some more important than the others. Kant, however, does not seem to have seen this, just as he does not appear to have realized what effect his observation on the third category as combining the first two would have on the notion of category itself.

Kant writes about the above distinction in the following manner, 'The first of the considerations suggested by the table is that while it contains four classes of the concepts of understanding, it may, in the first instance, be divided into two groups, those in the first group being concerned with objects of intuition, pure as well as empirical, those in the second group

with the existence of these objects, in their relation either to each other or to the understanding.'

The categories in the first group I would entitle the *mathematical*, while those in the second group, the *dynamical* (*ibid.*, 116). Kant seems to be suggesting in this formulation that while the categories in the first group, that is, those under quantity and quality relate to the *notion* of object as such, while those in the second group are concerned with relations between objects on the one hand, and their relation to the understanding on the other. Perhaps, what he wants to suggest is that the categories under '*relation*' relate to relation between objects while those under '*modality*' are concerned with the relations which these have to the understanding itself. The category of 'cause and effect', and of 'substance' and 'accidence' are obviously concerned with the relation that obtains between two objects or events and between a substance and a property.

The third category under this heading, that is, the category of 'community' or 'reciprocity' between agent and patient does not *prima facie* seem to make sense and Kant himself seems to feel some problem about it, particularly as it seems to be correlated to the disjunctive judgement in his system. He writes, for example:

Thirdly, in the case of one category, namely, that of *community*, which is found in the third group, its accordance with the form of a disjunctive judgement—the *form* which corresponds to it in the table of logical functions—is not as evident as in the case of the others (*ibid.*: 117).

Kant takes recourse to a strange strategy to justify the notion of the category of 'community' along with that of the disjunctive judgement with which it is associated and which, *prima facie*, does not seem to be correct. He writes:

To gain assurance that they do actually accord, we must observe that in all disjunctive judgements the sphere (that is, the multiplicity which is contained in any one judgement) is represented as a whole divided into parts (the subordinate concepts), and that since no one of them can be contained under any other, they are thought as co-ordinated with, not subordinated to, each other and so as determining each other, not in one direction only, as in a series, but reciprocally, as in an aggregate—if one member of the division is posited, all the rest are excluded, and conversely (*ibid.*, 117).

The fourth heading under '*modality*' contains the following categories under it, each of which is dichotomous in character and is related to its corresponding table of judgements given earlier. The dichotomous character of these categories seems, however, to be radically different from that which obtains under the heading of '*relation*'. There the dichotomy is not exactly a dichotomy as the two are related essentially in such a manner that both have to obtain in order that the thought may complete itself. One can not have cause without having an effect and even a substance without having a property and even in the case of community, if we accept Kant's interpretation of the disjunctive judgement, the one half without the 'other' half. As against this, the categories under '*modality*' have a different character as there one has to choose between the dichotomous pair as they can not simultaneously obtain either in thought or in respect of that which the thought is about. We can not think, in principle, that something is both possible and impossible, or that it exists and does not exist, or that it is both necessary and contingent. Nor can we think that something can have these characters simultaneously predicated of it. In fact, Kant himself does not think that the categories under the heading '*modality*' can be treated at par with those under other headings, that is, '*quality*', '*quantity*' and '*relation*'. He writes:

The *modality* of judgements is a quite peculiar function. Its distinguishing characteristic is that it contributes nothing to the content of the judgement (for, besides quantity, quality, and relation there is nothing that constitutes the content of a judgement), but concerns only the value of the copula in relation to thought in general (*ibid.*, 109).

This is in straight contradiction to what Kant himself had said about the categories under the headings of relation and modality as distinct from those under the headings of quality and quantity. According to him, as quoted earlier,

those in the first group being concerned with objects of intuition, pure as well as empirical, those in the second group (that is relation and modality) with the existence of these objects, in their relation either to each other or to the understanding (*ibid.*, 116).

Thus besides the earlier distinction between the categories under the headings of '*quality*' and '*quantity*', he now makes a further distinction between those of '*relation*' and the ones under '*modality*'. It is not clear

however, what exactly Kant means by the relation of copula to thought in general.

The situation becomes even more perplexing and strange if one remembers that, for Kant, the dichotomous category of 'existence-non-existence' occurs under 'modality' and so does that of 'possibility-impossibility' and 'necessity-contingency'. But, 'necessity', strangely, is for Kant not what is usually understood by the term in philosophical literature. Rather, it is a logical relation between the conclusion, the premises and results from the apprehension that the former 'follows' from the latter. According to him:

The apodeictic proposition thinks the assertoric as determined by these laws of the understanding, and therefore as affirming *a priori*; and in this manner it expresses logical necessity. Since everything is thus incorporated in the understanding step by step in as much as we first judge something problematically, then maintain its truth assertorically, and finally affirm it as inseparably united with the understanding, that is, as necessary and apodeictic—we are justified in regarding these three functions of modality as so many moments of thought (*ibid.*, 110).

[Der assertorische sagt von logischer Wirklichkeit oder Wahrheit, wie etwa in einem hypothetischen, im Vernunftschluss/das Antecedens im Obersatze problematisch, im Untersatze assertorisch vorkommt, und zeigt an, dass der Satz mit dem Verstande nach dessen Gesetzen schon verbunden sei, der apodiktische Satz denkt sich den assertorischen durch diese Gesetze des Verstandes selbst bestimmt, und daher *a priori* behauptend, und drückt auf solche Weise logische Nothwendigkeit aus. Weil nun hier alles sich gradweise dem Verstande einverleibt, so dass man zuvor etwas problematisch witeilt, darauf auch whol es assertorisch als wahr annimmt, endlich als unzertrennlich mit dem Verstande verbunden, d.i. als notwendig und apodiktisch behauptet, so kann man diese drei Funktionen der Modalität auch so viel momente des Denkens überhaupt nennen.²]

Kant, it seems, has forgotten that in case the first premise is a hypothetical judgement and the second is assertoric in respect of the antecedent in the hypothetical judgement, the conclusion *does not* reassert the assertoric in the second premise, but the consequence that was asserted problematically in the first premise. The necessity thus is seen as belonging to the consequence *in its relation* to the antecedent which was asserted

problematically in the first premise, and is now seen as a necessity, *because* of the positive assertion of the antecedent in the second premise.

Also, strangely, Kant seems to conceive of the major premise of the traditional syllogism in a hypothetical form when, traditionally, it was always conceived of as categorical in nature. This, however, anticipates the modern reformulation or translation of the universally quantified statement in terms of an 'if-then' implication which is always hypothetical in nature. The mistake, it seems, is there in Kant's original formulation itself where it is not clear whether he is referring in the conclusion to the antecedent asserted in the minor premise or the consequence asserted in the conclusion.

The problems that thus arise in respect of Kant's Doctrine of the Categories may be summarised as follows:

1. Is there a fundamental difference between the categories under 'quantity' and 'quality' on the one hand, and those under 'relation' and 'modality' on the other?
2. Is there a basic distinction between the categories under 'relation' and those under 'modality' as seems to be suggested by Kant's treatment of the latter?
3. What is the exact status of the third category in each group, which seems to have been specifically added by Kant to the list enumerated earlier by Aristotle? Is it a 'synthesis' of the first two categories in the list and if so, is it to be treated as the only 'real' category under that heading. In case the latter alternative is accepted, will there be only four categories in Kant's Doctrine, that is, those of, totality, limitation, reciprocity between agent and patient and necessity-contingency?
4. Is the category of 'necessity' under 'modality' to be understood as Kant wants us to understand, that is, as a relationship between the conclusion and the premises in a formal deductive system. If so, what is its relation to the category of 'causality' which is supposed to correspond with the hypothetical judgement in the 'table of judgements'?
5. What shall be the status of 'contingency' in the dichotomous pair 'necessity-contingency' under 'modality' and how is it different from 'possibility' which also has been given under 'modality'?

6. How can 'causality' be an independent category in Kant if it is only the third category which is supposed to be 'real', as it is a synthesis of the first two and, if so, it is the category of 'reciprocity between agent and patient' which will be the 'real' category and not the category of 'cause and effect' which will, in this perspective, only be an abstract 'moment' in the process of thinking which proceeds from the first to the second category and then culminates in the third.
7. In case 'causality' is not an independent category what happens to the Kantian enterprise of 'saving' the enterprise of knowledge from Humean scepticism which it is generally supposed to be.
8. What exactly will be the relation between 'causality' and 'necessity' which was supposed to be one of the central problems which Kant is said to have dealt with in his system?
9. What exactly is the function of the category of 'limitation' under 'quality' and the infinite judgement which corresponds to it in the 'table of judgements'?
10. What exactly does Kant mean by the category of 'reciprocity' which corresponds to the disjunctive judgement under the heading of 'relation'?
11. What exactly is the relation between the categories of 'totality', 'limitation', 'reciprocity' and 'necessity'? How do they constitute the process of understanding as unless this is clarified Kant's notion of categories will make hardly any sense.

Besides these, there is the additional problem which arises even in the context of the usual understanding of the doctrine of categories in Kant. These relate to two questions:³

1. Whether all the twelve categories apply simultaneously in each act of understanding, or *only* one of the categories under each of the headings is so applied?
2. In case it is the latter, what determines the *choice* of the category to be applied in a particular act of understanding?
3. In case it is the former, how can opposed categories be simultaneously applied in the same act of understanding of the phenomenon concerned?

The doctrine of categories in Kant is one of the most discussed topics in the history of western philosophical thought since it was first propounded

and has exercised tremendous influence inspite of the criticisms that have been levelled against it. The questions and problems raised above suggest that the doctrine needs to be examined in detail so that a fresh attempt can be made at 'understanding' it once again.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, Macmillan & Co., New York, St. Martin's Press, 1963, p. 107.
2. Herausgegeben Von Ingeborg Heidemann, Philipp Reclam Jun. Stuttgart. 1966, p. 145.
3. These two questions were raised in the 'Notes and Queries' section of the *JICPR*, Vol. XI, No. 3 and the following persons had taken part in the discussion:
 - Sri Kaushal Kishore Sharma
JICPR, Vol. XII, No. 3.
 - Professor Herbert Herring
JICPR, Vol. XII, No. 3.
 - Dr. Rajendra Gupta
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