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An Analysis of B. Malamud's Prose from the Perspective of I. Kant's Moral Philosophy

ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to examine the prose of Jewish American writer Bernard Malamud (1914–1986) through the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, a towering Enlightenment figure that has had a tremendous impact on intellectual circles to date. Based on qualitative research, the study begins with a brief introduction into Kant's ethical outlook, which is deontological rather than utilitarian. In other words, for an action to be deemed morally right it has to be primarily motivated by duty, not personal desire or goal. The duty-based ethics is manifested through the categorical imperative, considered as the universal law, whereby motives for a certain act are assessed. In this regard, there exists a significant similarity between Kant's ethical beliefs and those of Malamud, whose fiction highlights the embrace of moral values and one's moral responsibility toward others, in a world governed by greed and self-interest without showing consideration for one's fellow beings. Following a close analysis of Malamud's major works, it is concluded that the transformation of the Malamudian hero from an initially egotistical and self-indulgent individual to an altruistic and self-sacrificing person materializes in the manner of Kant's moral philosophy.

Keywords: Kant, moral philosophy, duty, Malamud, moral responsibility

Analiza Malamudove proze z vidika Kantove moralne filozofije

POVZETEK: Ta članek skuša preučiti prozo judovskega ameriškega pisatelja Bernarda Malamuda (1914–1986) skozi moralno filozofijo Immanuela Kanta, ključne razsvetljenske osebnosti, ki ima vse do danes izjemen vpliv na intelektualne kroge. Na podlagi kvalitativne raziskave se študija začne s kratkim uvodom v Kantov etični pogled, ki je deontološki in ne utilitarističen. Z drugimi besedami, da se dejanje šteje za moralno pravilno, mora biti primarno motivirano z dolžnostjo, ne osebno željo ali ciljem. Dolžnostna etika se kaže v kategoričnem imperativu, ki velja za univerzalni zakon, s katerim se presojajo motivi za določeno dejanje. V zvezi s tem obstaja velika podobnost med Kantovimi nauki in Malamudovimi etičnimi prepričanji, čigar leposlovje poudarja sprejemanje moralnih vrednot in moralno odgovornost do drugih v svetu, ki ga vodita pohlep in lastni interes, ne da bi izkazoval obzirnost do

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soljudi. Po natančni analizi Malamudovih glavnih del je bilo ugotovljeno, da se preobrazba malamudskega junaka iz sprva egoističnega in samovšečnega posameznika v altruistično in požrtvovalno osebo materializira na način Kantove morale.

Ključne besede: Kant, moralna filozofija, dolžnost, Malamud, moralna odgovornost

Introduction

The question of morality in Malamud's works has been the subject matter of research by several scholars, who have regarded Malamud's moral vision as primarily stemming from a condition of suffering and resulting compassion, attributing at times an ethnic secular Jewish identity to the moral perspective. Not taking into account the duality of Jewishness and suffering, this paper tries to explore Malamud's morality from a different perspective, namely by applying the Kantian moral philosophy, which is also known as deontological ethics.

Deontological ethics (from Greek: *deon* meaning 'duty' or 'obligation') is the ethical theory that emphasizes the assessment of an action as right or wrong, regardless of its outcome or consequence. It is the very antithesis of teleological ethics, which determines an action as right or wrong depending on its result or effect. Immanuel Kant belongs to the deontological ethics. As one of the main representatives of the Enlightenment, he applied an *a priori* rational approach to the existence and creation of a stable system of moral values, believing that certain actions are right or wrong, irrespective of our feelings and notwithstanding the result of these actions. For example, Kant (1999, xxxii) remarks that morally it is always wrong to lie because 'lying violates the dignity of humanity in one's own person.'

Morality for Kant is a rational concept that distinguishes humans from animals. Since the latter perform impulsive actions triggered by desires and instincts – not by reason – their actions cannot be considered moral. This is not the case with people, who have the capacity to reflect and make rational choices. Kant's moral philosophy is based on the concept of the categorical imperative (CI). In this regard, critics R. Johnson and A. Cureton (2022) have rightly remarked that:

Kant characterized the CI as an objective, rationally necessary and unconditional principle that we must follow despite any natural desires we may have to the contrary. All specific moral requirements, according to

Kant, are justified by this principle, which means that all immoral actions are irrational because they violate the CI.

The CI, in turn, derives from the exercise of good will and duty. In his major work, *Groundworks of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785/1997), Kant emphasizes that what makes a person good is the possession of a good will, which is governed by the moral law. The concept of good will refers to the determination of the individual to make only those decisions that have moral value and act upon these moral considerations. This good will, according to Kant, is such without limitation. 'It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that can be seen as good without limitation, except for good will' (7). In other words, good will is not affected by anything bad or harmful, whereas other attributes of good, such as: happiness, courage, power, and the like, are negatively impacted by external destructive factors or when characterized by an ill will.

Kant claims that a good will is such, despite its ramifications. 'A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself' (8). This means that even if the good will does not achieve its intended good purpose, even if failure is its final result, 'it would still shine by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself.' (8).

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine the application of Kant's moral philosophy to Malamud's works, hypothesizing that this approach further highlights the versatility of Malamud's moral vision.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative methodology, with primary sources focusing on three major novels by Malamud and Kant's main works, while secondary sources entailing materials from the internet.

Results

Kant's moral philosophy helps us to better understand Malamud's three major novels [*The Natural* (1952/1980), *The Assistant* (1957/1993), and *A New Life* (1961)], as part of this study. Each of the protagonists eventually mani-

fest goodwill and act from duty, which in turn assures them an ennobling approach to life.

Discussion

Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals entails three formulations of the CI:

- CI-1: 'Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a *universal law of nature*' (31). This formulation is also referred to as the Formula of the Law of Nature or the Principle of Universalization, wherewith it is meant that through our actions we should not harm or hurt others by using double standards, but every action should be conceived of and taken as part of the universal law.

- CI-2: 'So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means' (38). This statement is also called the formula of respect for oneself and each other, the fundamental concept of human dignity.

- CI-3: 'We should so act that we may think of ourselves as legislating universal laws through our maxims' (xxv). This formulation is a combination of the above two formulations and refers to the principle of autonomy, which is the essence of Kant's moral theory.

Kant's moral tenets can also be explored into Malamud's prose, which reveals the novelist's deep concerns about the human condition after World War II. Despite his poignant criticism, Malamud generally maintained a positive outlook on humans' capacity and inclination to better themselves and become responsible for others. Typically, his heroes start off as rather broken, immature, and selfish to eventually embrace moral values that entail acting from duty. The first novel *The Natural* centers on Rob Roy, a 35-year old talented baseball player who does not manifest the team spirit expected of him because he is obsessed with personal fame and sex. In yielding to the materialistic needs of Memo Paris, the *femme fatale* that nearly brings about his doom by convincing him to sell out the pennant, Roy debases himself. Malamud here raises the question: why does someone decide to sell himself? In his acceptance address at the National Book Award, in 1959, the writer stated:

I am quite tired of the colossally deceitful devaluation of man in this day; for whatever explanation: that life is cheap amid a prevalence of

wars; or because we are drugged by totalitarian successes into a sneaking belief in their dehumanizing processes; or tricked beyond self-respect by the values of the creators of our thing-ridden society; [...] or because, having invented the means of his extinction, man values himself less for it and lives in daily dread that he will in a fit of passion, or pique or absented-mindedness, achieve his end. Whatever the reason, his fall from grace in his eyes is betrayed in the words he has invented to describe himself as he is now: fragmented, abbreviated, other-directed, organizational, anonymous man, a victim, in the words that are used to describe him, of a kind of synecdochic irony, the part for the whole. The devaluation exists because he accepts it without protest. (Malamud in Lasher 1991, 14)

Acting in violation of the third formulation of the CI, Roy also disregards his moral obligation to his fans. In relation to this, Iris Lemon – his supporter and the complete opposite of Memo – reminds him: ‘I hate to see a hero fail. There are so few of them [...] Without heroes we’re all plain people and don’t know how far we can go’ (139–140). Iris tries to explain to him that a hero should sacrifice his ego, as he is not in the field for himself but for others. Thus, she urges Roy to transition, in Kant’s words, from a heteronomy – whereby his choices are dictated by desires, inclinations, and external influences – to autonomy – characterized by freedom and independence – which is also the ‘supreme principle of morality’ (Malamud in Fieser and Stumpf 2015, 313).

The second novel *The Assistant* is Malamud’s most acclaimed book. It centers on the journey of Frank Alpine from a rogue to an honest and responsible individual under the moral guidance of the grocer Morris Bober. The latter, despite economic hardships, takes on Frank in his store. Acting from duty, Morris opens his store every day at six in the morning, in order to give a three-cent roll to an old woman. Also, Morris sells on trust to a drunk woman although he knows that she will never pay. Frank, on the other hand, noticing that some grocers are dishonest with their customers, suggests that Morris do the same:

‘Why don’t you try a couple of those tricks yourself, Morris? Your amount of profit is small.’

Morris looked at him in surprise. 'Why should I steal from my customers? Do they steal from me?'

'They would if they could.'

'When a man is honest he don't worry when he sleeps. This is more important than to steal a nickel.' (100)

While Frank often steals from the cash desk himself, upon Morris' death, he eventually toils night and day, so as to provide for the grocer's wife and daughter. The latter relates: 'He had kept them alive. Because of him she had enough to go to school at night' (293).

Kant's moral tenets can be similarly probed into the novel *A New Life*, which centers on Seymour Levin's search of a new life by relocating from the East to the West as an English teacher. Upon arriving in the small town of Eastchester, the home of Cascadia college, Levin is stunned by the beauty of the nature and believes he has found paradise in other regards, as well. However, the New Yorker is soon labeled as a troublemaker by his unscholarly colleagues, whom he constantly defies, including the affair with the boss's wife, which causes him to be fired.

What is initially evident is that none of the characters acts from duty but for personal motives. Fairchild, the head of the department, boasts about his outdated grammar book, keeping it with minor changes as part of the program for 30 years, while stifling any liberal ideas among his subordinates. Similarly, Gilley, Levin's direct superior, and Fabrikant, his colleague, try, each for their own benefit, to use Levin, in order to be elected head of the department. On the other hand, Pauline, Gilley's wife, neglected by her husband, regards Levin as a great opportunity to fulfill her sexual needs. Meanwhile, initially, even Levin does not perform actions of moral value, but is guided by personal desires, treating others as a means to an end. Being a victim of his sensual weakness, he is characterized by a pronounced lust for women. His first three unsuccessful sexual adventures with waitress Laverne, colleague Avis Fliss, and student Nadaline depict him as a wanderer who does not attribute morality to sex. Nor does he consider his intimate interaction with Pauline more than an affair.

Levin's willpower to perform moral actions according to the categorical imperative is still weak, because he comes from a dark past with alcohol

addiction and suicidal thoughts. From the first pages, he declares this: 'My life [...] has been without much purpose to speak of. Some blame the times for that, I blame myself [...]. In the past, I cheated myself and killed my choices' (14). It is apparent that his lack of self-respect prevents him from respecting others. In his book *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797/1991), Kant urges toward a moral self-knowledge which 'will, first, dispel fanatical contempt for oneself as man (for the whole human race), since this contradicts itself. It is only through the noble predisposition to the good in us, which makes man worthy of respect' (236). In other words, we have a duty to recognize and show appreciation for ourselves, otherwise we cannot show appreciation for anyone's dignity. An individual must be fully humane in order to treat others with the same degree of humanity. In this regard, the scholar Roger J. Sullivan, in his book *An Introduction to Kant's Ethics* (1996, 154), remarks: 'The overriding question should be, What kind of persons are we making of ourselves? And the answer we should be able to give is that we are doing everything we can to cultivate self-respect. More than anything else, that will motivate us to become the sort of person we should be and to live the sort of life we should live.'

In this light, Levin still operates double standards, hence in complete violation of the first formulation of the categorical imperative. On the one hand, he maintains a secret relationship with the wife of his direct superior – although he understands that: 'I've got to keep control of myself. I must always know where I am' (191). On the other hand, he criticizes Fairchild's text as pseudointellectual or other colleagues as unscholarly. However, Levin is not entirely devoid of self-reflection or intention of giving his life a rational and moral direction. From the beginning, he confesses to Pauline, right after arriving at their house: 'I've reclaimed an old ideal or two [...]. They give a man his value if he stands for them' (14). This is his greatest challenge: control of personal desires and commitment to the common good.

Levin knows his strengths from the start. He comes to Cascadia College as a reformed man who hopes to materialize his humanist goals in a new environment. Unlike his colleagues, he maintains a liberal attitude because, according to him, 'The true liberal, in his moral fervor, kept alive the visionary ideal [...] and fought at every opportunity to translate it into a better life for people' (201). In this way, Levin as a liberal humanist, be-

believes that man can survive ignorance and cruelty only by doing good to others: 'Those who have discovered their own moral courage, or created it, must join others who are moral; these must lead, without fanaticism. Any act of good is a diminution of evil in the world' (227).

Levin comes to the West to establish a new identity, in accordance with his new principles. While teaching at the college, Levin puts forward the idea of incorporating the liberal arts into science and technology-based curriculum, in order to help his students grow spiritually by teaching them 'what to write' in addition to 'how to write' (101). Levin's aspirations stem from his humanistic views, which he must mightily defend against his wicked colleagues. He fights relentlessly for his ideals of freedom, love and brotherhood by launching the campaign against the authorities' unfavorable attitude about the liberal arts, which manifests their antipathy toward the growth of the human spirit and disregard for human dignity.

It was emphasized above that the basic principle of the categorical imperative is the autonomous will, which makes the individual the legislator in the kingdom of ends, whereas a heteronomous will is influenced by other individuals or certain desires. In this light, for some time, Levin is characterized by a heteronomous will in initially pleasing Gilley and later supporting Fabrikant for the elections. However, the moment he discovers that Fabrikant is an opportunist, a conformist and a man without dignity, Levin is resolved, using Kant's words, to 'be no man's lackey' (Kant 1999, 558). Likewise, he stops supporting Gilley, who seeks to become head of department and merely maintain the status quo.

Noticing that both men have low standards, Levin decides to announce his own candidacy for the post. As a candidate, he suggests that the dean consider the possibility of introducing the Great Books program, aiming to bring together the isolated faculty community through the exchange of new ideas, impressions, and perspectives. Meanwhile, although he has ended the liaison with Pauline prior to initiating the election campaign, Gilley finds out about their affair. This causes Levin to lose the elections and his job. However, Levin leaves the College knowing that he has already made some changes possible: Fairchild's grammar book has been removed after so many years. Also, Gilley is considering giving some lite-

rature classes to lecturers teaching graduate students. Likewise, the dean has requested the introduction of the Great Books program. His good will which surpasses any personal interest has full practical and moral value.

On a personal level, of his own free will, he decides to marry Pauline and requests custody of her two children. Although his feelings are not as strong as before, he feels a responsibility to love her. Surprised at this decision, Gilley asks him: 'Why take that load upon yourself?' To which Levin replies curtly: 'Because I can, you son of a bitch' (319). Through this terse and powerful sentence, Levin shows that he has acted from duty notwithstanding internal obstacles. Such an act has genuine moral value and is indicative of the fulfillment of the categorical imperative.

Conclusion

The essence of Kant's deontological ethics is acting from duty, regardless of the individual's ends, desires or circumstances. Duty, for Kant, is an exercise of the free will for the individual who, despite reservations, makes decisions of moral value, in respect for the supreme moral law – the categorical imperative. This imperative is addressed to the rational human being, who has a moral obligation to respect oneself and others, never treating oneself or others as a means, but always as an end. Through one's behavior and actions, every person should be guided by the principles of the universal law which creates the foundations of a good and free society, where the rational individual is considered as the legislator. As Christine Korsgaard emphasizes, in her introduction to *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: 'Morality, on Kant's conception, is a kind of metaphysics in practice. We ourselves impose the laws of reason on our actions, and through our actions, on the world, when we act morally' (1997, xxiv).

Kant's deontological ethics has a considerable application to the three novels analysed above. Roy, Frank, and especially Levin manage to fully implement the principles of the categorical imperative, thanks to their ability to control personal instincts and desires, in order to perform rational actions of moral value, both on a personal and professional level. Their courageous and rational acts, toward the end of respective novels, evidence the evolution of their being and their contribution to a better and more liberal society.

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