

Some Reflections On The Formulation Of Duty : Immanuel Kant

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Abstract : Sir Immanuel Kant, the pioneer of modern philosophy argues that the moral rules, rightness or wrongness of our particular actions depend upon our moral or *practical reason*. Practical reason, being the universal element in human nature, enforces moral law or *categorical imperative* upon itself. Emotions have no place in a moral life. Being a *deontologist*, Kant holds morality of an action does not depend upon its intended consequence. To him, an action will be morally good if its motive is pure, i.e., if it is prompted by a consciousness of duty rather than consequences. *Virtue*, the aim of life, lies in the *good will* of an agent which is the only jewel that shines by its own light. The *autonomy* of the will, being the only source of moral law, compels us to do the right and to avoid the wrong without any condition. Kant's conception of morality has been influenced by the ethical writings of philosophers like *Christian Wolff* and *Alexander Baumgarten*, according to whom the morality of our actions lies in the development of our own intellectual abilities and benevolent nature towards others. Kant has completely rejected the views of philosophers like *Epicurus*, according to whom the morality of our action depends upon the satisfaction of our senses and fulfillment of our selfish requirement. Kant speaks about the feeling of *reverence*, pure respect for the categorical imperative, a command of our practical reason, which is accepted on its own value rather than as a rule for attaining some desired end.

Keywords: Good Will, Categorical Imperative, Motive of Duty, Formal Maxim, Reverence

German Philosopher Sir Immanuel Kant always believes that reason is the source of morality. When an agent is guided by reason while performing an action, his / her action will be considered as a good action. Kant differs practical reason from pure reason considering that by pure reason we get only theoretical knowledge, but by practical reason we get moral laws and maxims. Kant thinks God, as *Perfect Rational Agent*, is never controlled by passion, emotion etc. So the word "Duty" cannot be applicable to the action of God. But we the ordinary human beings, as *Partial Rational Agent*, are often motivated by our passions, emotions etc. and Kant thinks while performing an action, when there is a conflict between our reason and passion, then reason imposes duty on the agent's will, in other words, the word "duty" is applicable to the human actions only. Kant differs *Autonomous will*, where an agent acts in accordance with moral duty rather than his / her own desires or intentions from *Heteronomous will*, where an agent acts in accordance with his / her own desires rather than reason or moral duty. Thus autonomous will only reveal itself through the notion of duty, in other words, an action will be called duty in perfect sense, according to Kant, which is performed under the guidance of *Good will*, and good will is manifested in the performance of an action for the sake of fulfilling a duty rather than for any external end.

Kant describes Good will as Good without qualification or Absolute Good or Good –in –itself or Unconditioned Good. He mentions, "*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.*"¹ He distinguishes Good will from other conditioned goods i.e., health, wealth, honour, intelligence, wit, judgement, courage, resolution, passion, affection, moderation, etc. All these have no intrinsic value as they can be abused by a bad will. They are good only when they are guided by good will. Good will is the only condition for the goodness of the conditioned goods. Kant describes that only good will, being independent of other conditions, is good in all circumstances. Thus he says regarding good will that, "...if with its greatest efforts it should yet achieve nothing, and there should remain only the good will ... then, like a jewel, it would still shine by its own light, as a thing which has its whole value in itself."² Good will is the rational will which is not controlled by human emotion, passion, feeling, inclination or desire, not controlled by any end or consequence. It is only controlled by the pure respect for the *moral law*.

Before explaining Kant's formulation of duty, it is important to discuss very briefly what is Kant's notion about the moral law. Kant thinks that this moral law is an unconditional command of our reason which is described in his philosophy as *categorical imperative* i.e., I ought to do such and such. It is *apriori* in nature devoid of all empirical elements. Kant's categorical imperative can be distinguished from hypothetical imperative. A hypothetical imperative is a command in a conditional form : if I will this end I ought to do such and such. A hypothetical imperative as a principle of conduct is always accepted as a rule for achieving some desired external end and not on its own merits. But categorical imperative is not controlled by any external end. We ought to do such and such for its own sake. Moral law demands our unconditional obedience towards itself. This moral law, imposed by our practical reason upon itself, ought to obey for its own sake. It is not a means to a higher end but has its own intrinsic value. Kant has

formulated the categorical imperative more specifically with the help of these following maxims : (i) Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will to be a universal law, (ii) Treat every rational being including yourself always as an end, and never as a means, (iii) Act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxim, (iv) Act as a member of the kingdom of ends. Maxim is a principle upon which we act. For example, a person may determine that he will do morning walk everyday at 6: 00 a.m. and when he acts by this principle, then it can be said that he acts according to that maxim. This maxim though applicable to that person may not be applicable to others. Maxim is a purely subjective principle which may be good or bad. Kant elucidates his first maxim by the example of promise breaking act . According to Kant it is wrong to break a promise as this action cannot be universalized. If a universal rule was established where everyone could break a promise whenever he desired to do so, then no one could keep reliance on promises. In that case the incident of making promises would become invalid and there would be no question of breaking promises also. Kant considers that our intellect or rational nature which separates us from all other types of sentient species should be respected and no one should treat himself as a means to anybody else or use any other person as a means to him. For example, the incident of committing suicide is morally wrong as the person who commits suicide treats himself not as an end because of not giving proper respect to the inherent value of humanity inside him, but merely as a means to end his suffering. Similarly the incidents of making false promises intentionally to someone else , letting down one’s own inner talents, failing to help persons in distress are the instances of not treating someone as an end but as a means which are not morally acceptable at all. Kant mentions clearly that while treating someone as an end, I respect his / her intrinsic value but while treating someone as a means, I see him / her as having only instrumental value. He argues that categorical imperative only arises from our rational will. Categorical imperative compels us to follow a universal law made by our own rational will and which is particularized by ourselves, as rational agents, through our maxims. Kant speaks of an ideal society of mankind, ‘a kingdom of ends’ where all persons being autonomously controlled, impose internal rational law or categorical imperative upon themselves, obey this self– applied moral law by themselves, live with others perfectly in a complete mutual harmonious way by giving equal intrinsic value and proper respect to each other and believing the fundamental fact that one’s own good remains in the cultivation of the goods of other persons. Kant thinks in this ideal society everyone being rational, enjoys perfect happiness, liberty and autonomy or sovereignty as well.

Kant’s notion of duty consists of three propositions. In his *first* proposition he claimed that, “*A human action is morally good ; not because it is done from immediate inclination - still less because it is done from self– interest – but because it is done for the sake of duty.*”³ This means that an action can be considered morally good, if it is done solely out of moral motive or *motive of duty*. Motive means a moving force which persuade us to act. This motive of duty is the necessary and sufficient condition for being an action morally good. Kant thinks that an action which accords with duty or which conforms to duty is morally right or justified. To declare an action as morally good, we have to know first , from which motive that action is done. If motive of duty is absent in our action, then according to Kant, that action has no moral worth. Only motive of duty gives the moral value to an action. To him, to judge the moral worth of an action, we have to notice whether that action is done for the sake of duty or not.

Kant thinks an action even if it accords with duty or conforms to duty, is not commonly considered as morally good if it is done solely out of self interest. Sometimes it is our tendency to consider an action morally good which is done solely from our immediate inclination, i.e., sympathy, generosity etc. For example, everyone should take care of their aged parents. Now if someone performs this out of sympathy, or for the greed of property, then Kant thinks that his / her action cannot be designated as “morally good” because the element - ‘duty for the sake of duty’ is absent here. Again if motive of duty is present along with other motives, then the action will be morally good. But if other motives are present and motive of duty is absent, then an action may be right or praiseworthy in the society but cannot be morally good. Thus Kant says, “... *a man shows moral worth, not in doing good from inclination, but in doing it for the sake of duty.*”⁴ Kant takes the example of a shopkeeper whose duty is to keep a fixed and general price for everyone and not to cheat his inexperienced customer. Kant thinks, though this principle of fair dealing is praiseworthy, but, as that shopkeeper’s self– interest is also included here, so shopkeeper’s action cannot be considered as morally good. In this example, that shopkeeper performs his action by thinking that, through honest and fair dealing the sale of his shop will increase and he will earn more profit etc. But if he does this action of fair dealing solely out of moral motive or motive of duty, then alone his action will be justified as morally good.

In his *second* proposition about duty, Kant mentions – “*An action done from duty has its moral worth, not from the results it attains or seeks to attain, but from a formal principle or maxim - the principle of doing one’s duty whatever that may be.*”⁵ Being a supporter of the *deontological view of morality*, Kant believes that whether an action is morally good or not does not depend upon the consequence of that action. The moral worth of the action depends

solely on the principle on which the agent acts. In his opinion, an action which is done from the principle of doing one's duty, whatever may be, for the sake of duty and not for attainment of the desired result is morally good. Moral goodness is always unconditional. Our volition behind the moral action is guided by principle by which we are commanded or compelled to act. This imperative is of our reason which is designated by Kant as categorical imperative and which we think should be obeyed always in every circumstances. Thus there is always a sense of obligation in every moral action. Duty implies that we are under some kind of obligations and this obligations comes to us in the form of imperative.

Kant mentions about two types of principle - one is subjective principle and the other is objective principle. Subjective principle is a principle on which a rational agent acts and objective principle is one on which every rational agent would necessarily act if reason had full control over his faculty of desire, and therefore one on which he ought to act. Kant considers maxim as subjective principle and practical law as objective principle. Kant divides maxim in two types – Material Maxim and Formal Maxim. According to him, moral worth of an action must be determined by *formal* maxim, not *material* maxim at all. A maxim with its particular motive to attain a desired or intended result is called material maxim. For example, “if you want to pass the examination you must study sincerely.” Material maxim always is expressed through hypothetical proposition, where by “if” word the particular motive or the intended result and by “then” word the particular action which is to be done in order to attain that result are expressed. Kant considers that by material maxim the moral worth of an action cannot be judged at all, as the moral value of an action does not derive from its desired consequences. The moral goodness of an action is derived only through formal maxim which does not bother about the intended purpose or consequence of an action. To act for the sake of duty is to act on a formal maxim, where the desire to attain some intended result is not included. Formal maxim is not expressed through a hypothetical proposition. A formal maxim determines our will irrespective of ends. In Kant's language, “*To act for the sake of duty is to act on a formal maxim ‘irrespective of all objects of the faculty of desire’.*”⁶

In his *third* proposition about duty, Kant says, “*Duty is the necessity to act out of reverence for the law.*”⁷ Kant thinks that duty always means some kind of necessitation or obligation towards an action. Duty is objectively determined by the law, but subjectively determined by the *reverence* for the law. Because of our reverence for the moral law, the action which is determined by it as duty, we feel some kind of necessitation or obligation to perform that action. Kant thinks if men were completely rational agent just like God, who is always guided by reason, if human beings were never controlled by their emotions, passions, inclinations etc. then there would be no kind of obligation at all regarding their actions. Thus for human beings moral obligation is inseparably related to duty. For a perfect or complete rational agent the same objective principle, which for a imperfect rational agent is considered as imperative, will not be imperative at all. A perfect rational agent has neither any duties, nor will he feel any reverence for the moral law. Because of human frailty, the moral law appears to us as a law of duty which demands our obedience. Where we the human beings, the partial rational agent often say ‘I ought’, a complete rational agent will say ‘I will’. This moral law gives rise to a feeling of fear, when it is imposed upon us. Side by side, being imposed by our own rational nature, a feeling of attraction or devotion etc. is also excited from that moral law. Kant thinks that this complex and unique feeling is the feeling of reverence or respect which means merely consciousness of the subordination of my will to a law without the mediation or the intervention of external influences on my senses. In Kant's language, “*...reverence (or respect) - unique feeling which is due, not to any stimulus of the senses, but to the thought that my will is subordinated to such a universal law independently of any influence of sense.*”⁸ Reverence is properly awareness of a value which thwarts or demolishes my self-love. The object of reverence is the law alone, which is imposed by our pure practical reason upon us. A morally good action is that which is performed out of reverence for the law, and in this way that action becomes uniquely and unconditionally valuable. Kant says that to act on the maxim of doing one's duty for its own sake is to act out of reverence for the law.

Question may arise that moral action does not depend upon our feelings but on our practical reason. But when it is said that duty is performed out of reverence for the moral law, then does not this reverence (respect) refer to some kind of feeling for the moral law?

Kant's answer is though reverence is a kind of feeling, a pure respect, but it is not externally produced feeling which is received from outside influence but it is self imposed or internally produced by a rational concept and so it is specifically different from the other types of feelings which can be reduced to fear or attraction. The feeling of reverence, in Kant's vision, is nothing but the rational consciousness of the subordination of my will to the law of duty.

Kant classifies the duties as (i) perfect self - regarding duty, (ii) perfect other – regarding duty, (iii) imperfect self - regarding duty and (iv) imperfect other – regarding duty. Perfect duty is strict duty which is always to be performed,

where no exception is admissible, but in imperfect duty, agent has a provision to decide arbitrarily how to perform the duty. An imperfect duty allows flexibility. Kant believed that perfect duties deserve more importance than imperfect duties. If there is a conflict between these two types of duty, the perfect duty must be followed. The duty to refrain from suicide is the example of perfect self - regarding duty. To refrain from making false promise that one has no intention of keeping is the example of perfect other – regarding duty. The duty to cultivate one’s natural predispositions for skills and talent is the example of imperfect self - regarding duty and the duty to contribute to the happiness of others or the duty of beneficence or mutual aid is the instance of imperfect other – regarding duty.

Kant can be criticized that he eliminates feelings like sympathy, love, compassion, emotion from our life in order to determine the moral goodness of an action. To him, an action is morally good which is performed only from moral motive or for the sake of duty and out of reverence for the moral law. By arguing that our practical reason is the only source of morality, Kant actually builds up a wall of unfriendly relation between reason and passion. But human life is a unity of both reason and passion. If we separate our passions, desires, feelings etc. from our moral life, then the material of morality in whole will be lost. Kant’s doctrine eliminates the form of morality from the matter or content of morality. Kant’s mistake is that, he totally forgets that in our human life reason and sensibility inseparably conjoin with each other and there is no relation of mutual contradiction between them. A man’s perfection lies in the satisfaction of both the element - the reason and the passion or the sensibility. Reason gives the form and sensibility supplies material for moral life. Sensibility is the matter of moral life on which the form of reason is applicable to.

Mackenzie criticizes Kant’s moral theory as very much stringent and extreme rigorous because he completely excludes feelings, passions, emotions, sentience etc from our moral life. Kant thinks that the action which are done out of love, impulse and compassion will be called pathological, abnormal. Out of good will, an action which is done for the sake of duty is morally good. But Mackenzie argues that, “...*Much of the conduct that men commonly praise, springs rather from feeling than from any direct application of reason.*”⁹ We the human beings live in a society with a mentality of mutual understanding for each other to fulfill our desires. In Seth’s language, “*Kill out sensibility, and you not only impoverish your own life, but you separate yourself from your fellows no less thoroughly than if you make your own pleasure your only good.*”¹⁰ He considers that, “*The way to all human goodness lies in learning ‘the value and significance of flesh’.*”¹¹ F. H. Jacobi describes that Kant’s good will without the content of morality is ‘*a will that wills nothing*’.¹² He also thinks that being a rational animal a man cannot act only in the basis of blind obedience to the law of reason for its own sake, because the law is made for the sake of man and not man for the sake of law. The significance of Jacobi’s critical assessment is to deny the categorical imperative as a kind of command where no explanation is given and people are unconditionally obliged to obey that moral law as described by Kant.

Another objection which arises is called *Paradox of Asceticism*. Kant thinks that in our moral life there is always a continuous conflict between reason and passion – duty and desire. The more we try to control our emotions with our pure practical reason, the more this intensity of the above conflict becomes minimize and in this way, if sometime it happens that our passions, emotions become entirely controlled or resisted by our pure intellectual nature, then it will be the time when this so called conflict will also cease to exist and human moral life will come to an end after lacking the conflict between our desires and pure rational nature.

Against the first maxim of categorical imperative Mackenzie¹³ argued that this principle is merely formal from which no definite matter can be derived. It only indicates what we should not do under certain circumstances. The formula does not extract any positive guidance about what we ought to do. The principle does not mention any positive principle of conduct.

Against the second maxim it can be argued that there are some exceptional cases where Kant’s principle cannot be applied at all. When soldiers sacrifice their lives for the sake of their country, their lives can be treated as means of bringing freedom. In the same way a porter can be treated as a means of carrying goods and personal belongings, a teacher can be treated as a means of distribution of knowledge, a banker can be treated as a means of safely protecting public money in the bank etc.

Against the third maxim Lillie¹⁴ mentions that Kant has abandoned the pure deontological view of morality, the view which does not concern with the consequences of an action, while explaining about the notion of kingdom of ends by considering those actions as morally good which imply the concern about the welfare or happiness of others as well as ourselves.

In order to answer to these criticisms it can be argued in support of Kant, that neither he wants to separate the feelings of love, compassion etc. from our lives in order to determine the moral goodness of an action nor he accepts

the expiry of the conflict between our reason and sensibility from our moral life. Rather he thinks that those feelings may be present behind our actions. But to consider an action morally good, moral motive or motive of duty also has to be present. To give money to a beggar is a praiseworthy work in society. When someone performs this task, then behind this action love, compassion, sympathy etc. are also present. But according to Kant, this action can be considered morally good if along with these types of feelings this action is performed out of good will and for the sake of duty so that even if these impulses disappear, then also this action may be performed out of good will and motive of duty. Kant thinks that though our reason cannot directly gives instruction to sympathize with a particular person, it gives direction to sympathize with the whole race of humans. The maxim of the End in Itself teaches us to respect the intrinsic value of humanity. Regarding the criticism against the first maxim of categorical imperative, C. D. Broad argued in support of Kant that, he is only concerned with the form of general rule of moral conduct just like a logician concerns with the structure of a valid syllogism, not with a specific argument. Broad thinks that Kant would say “...it is no more the business of ethics to provide rules of conduct than it is the business of logic to provide arguments. The business of ethics is to provide a test for rules of conduct, just as it is the business of logic to provide a test for arguments.”¹⁵ William Lillie argued in support of Kant against the criticism of second principle of categorical imperative that, “What he rightly emphasized was that we should never use people as mere means, but always should remember that they are ends, things of value in themselves apart from the services that they render us.”¹⁶ It is only morally wrong when we use other people as means for our cheap and bad ends i.e., when a woman is used as prostitute, when a child is used as a servant etc.. Kant always considers that reason is the solitary element that distinguishes man from other sentient beings and we should always control our sensibilities in the light of pure reason rather than cutting off from our lives. Otherwise we have no difference from other sentient beings. Kant argues that morality of an action depends upon the rational nature of human beings which is unchangeable and universal. To him a good life necessarily refers to an intellectual life where superiority is given to our rational ability or intellectual power, not merely to our animal tendencies. In this way Kant shows the right direction of morality by giving emphasis on human reason and by holding the view to perform duty for its own sake out of good will and pure regard for the categorical imperative.

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Perfect-imperfect Duties-2, Immanuel Kant. Kant's definitive presentation of the duties enumerated here thus has far less affinity with the present discussion of them (based on the formula of the law of nature) than it does with his discussion of them below in connection with the second formula, that of humanity as end in itself (Ak 4:429-30). Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 209. 6. some element of denial of our own happiness in the face of duty to the dignity of others or the common good. Therefore, in most moral situations the way of right lies with the more painful. In this way, we not only come to a better appreciation of Kant's views on the laws of nature, but also see more clearly some significant structural similarities between his theoretical and practical philosophies as a whole. Read more.

Article. Immanuel Kant was born in Königsberg, East Prussia (today Kaliningrad, Russia), to a devoutly religious Lutheran Pietist family. At the age of 16, he entered the University of Königsberg, initially to study theology, and later to read natural science and philosophy. Three selections from Kant's ethical writings are included here. In the first selection, from the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (also called the *Prolegomena* or *Groundwork*), Kant demonstrates how it is possible to show that suicide is inherently wrong. To put it another way, under an alternative formulation of the Categorical Imperative, it is not possible to commit suicide and yet still treat oneself as an end in oneself (as morality requires that one treat all humanity), not just as a means only.