

## Chapter 23

### Immanuel Kant's Ethical Theory

**Key Words:** Deontological, hypothetical imperative, categorical imperative, moral law, postulates of morality, universalizability, kingdom of ends, virtue, duty, good will, assertorial, practical reason.

This chapter introduces Immanuel Kant's ethical theory, which adopts a deontological approach. It starts with an examination of the possibility of moral philosophy in the Kantian framework. Two very important concepts in this context are the notion of categorical imperative and the idea of good will. After writing his first *Critique*, which deals with pure reason, Kant addresses the problem of morality, which the latter could not account for. Here instead of pure reason, it is practical reason that becomes relevant.

As mentioned above, Kant's ethical theory adopts a deontological approach which highlights the concept of duty and the idea of universal moral law. This ethical theory has at its centre the idea of categorical imperative, as the ethical command is not hypothetical or conditional, but categorical. Kant discusses various formulations of the categorical imperative. Many concepts like the cosmos, self and God, which pure reason found unable to prove, appear as essential regulative principles and postulates of morality in the context of practical reason. With all these concepts, Kant initiates an ethical theory, which he thought would rationally justify a morality based on duties.

#### The Ideas of Reason and Ethics

The three "ideas of reason," self, world and God play a vital role in the ethical theory developed by Kant. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant had shown that theoretical reason itself cannot prove their reality. According to him they are not constitutive, but are regulative, as they add systematic unity and coherence to our experience. Since they are related to morals in significant ways, they have immense practical importance.

Kant's Moral Philosophy advocates a deontological moral theory, which opposes making morality conditional to actual circumstances and consequences of actions. What makes an action right according to Kant is not the fact that it leads to good and desirable consequences, but it is performed for the sake of duty. He maintains that the supreme principle of morality is the "categorical imperative," which is an unconditional command. He asserts that the categorical imperative has the nature of an

unconditional moral command or law, which human beings are obliged to follow in their capacity as rational creatures. It is a universal law, which allows no exception. But the central notion of Kant's ethical theory is the idea of good will, which he elaborates with the metaphor of a jewel that shines in its own light.

### **The Possibility of Morality: Salient Features of Kant's Moral Philosophy**

Kant maintains that nature as such is impersonal and nonmoral. Though the world exhibits an order that suggests the possibility of a great and benevolent designer or a God, who provides meaning to everything that happens around us, with the limited human faculties we cannot derive any knowledge about it. This aspect has been demonstrated in the first *Critique*, where he has affirmed the impossibility of metaphysics as a science. Kant agrees with Hume in ridiculing the attempts that sought to find a basis for morality in metaphysical truths.

Since how the world functions is nonmoral, Kant seeks to locate the realm of morals outside the realm of nature. He thus maintains that morals must be independent of how the world functions. Moreover, he holds that there should be an element of unconditionality about morals, as they must be universal and rational. His analysis of theoretical reason sought to locate the preconditions of human knowledge in the very structure of reason itself. Similarly, his moral philosophy intends to discover the *a priori* principles according to which we judge when we make moral judgments from the examination of the structure of practical reason. Hence Kant's approach is profoundly original and unique. As Alastair McIntyre observes:

Kant stands at one of the great dividing points in the history of ethics. For perhaps the majority of later philosophical writers, including many who are self-consciously anti-Kantian, ethics is defined as a subject in Kantian terms. For many who have never heard of philosophy, let alone of Kant, morality is roughly what Kant said it was. [*A Short History of Ethics*]

On the one hand, his theory provides a profound philosophical account of our moral knowledge and ethical judgements by examining their *a priori* structures. Kant pursues to elaborate the idea of a necessary, universal and *a priori* moral knowledge which is manifested in human behavior, when it is ethical. He affirms that it is *a priori* because he does not want to make his theory depend on the actual behaviour of human beings which depends on several conditions. Hence he focuses not the knowledge of "what is," which tells us "how men actually behave", but on "what ought to be" or "how men ought to behave." In other words, Kant seeks to examine the origin of the *a priori* elements in our moral knowledge, by discovering the *a priori* principles according to which we judge when we make moral judgments.

In other words, he seeks to isolate the a priori, and unchanging, elements of morality, by examining what form must a precept have if it is to be recognized as a moral precept. Reflecting the fundamental concerns of his transcendental project and critical approach in philosophy, Kant seeks to know the universal element in moral reasoning by raising the question “what is unconditionally good?” In this context he introduces the notion of categorical imperative and distinguishes it from other forms of imperatives; hypothetical, assertorial etc.

### **Hypothetical Imperative and Categorical Imperative**

In order to demonstrate the unconditional nature of the moral imperative, Kant distinguishes the categorical imperative from other forms of imperatives, primarily from the hypothetical imperative. The latter holds only for certain limited groups of people who, under certain conditions, have certain ends in view. For eg., the statement, “if I wish to score good marks in the examination, then I should study well”, is a hypothetical imperative, as it obviously depends on certain conditions. The assertorial imperatives too are conditional. For eg., the statement, “everybody seeks certain ends like happiness etc. Kant says that the hypothetical rules for attaining them are universally applicable. But they are conditional because they hold only because of the condition that people seek these ends. The rules, which are to be observed in order to attain happiness, are assertorial laws. Kant does not consider such rules as constituting the part of morality, as they are conditional. For him an ethical imperative should be unconditional. The hedonists on the other hand, affirm that all the laws of morality are assertorial. Kant here asserts the importance of the categorical imperative, which holds unconditionally and universally true. He finds that the moral law alone qualifies to be considered as an imperative in this sense. The moral law is conceived as absolute, a priori, rational and as based on the idea of Good Will. There are no ifs and buts when it is applied. It does not depend on any of our purposes or goals and in this sense Kant opposes all forms of teleological and consequentialist ethical theories that bind ethics to external conditions.

### **The idea of good will**

To answer the question, “what is unconditionally good?” Kant examines the idea of good will. He says that there is nothing in the world or even out of it that can be called good without qualification except a good will. Things, which are intrinsically good, are good even if they exist all alone.

Kant claims that, everything else is good only in relation to the Good Will, which is the ultimate criterion that determines the moral worth of an action. All other things that are usually considered as good like health, wealth, gifts of fortune, talents, intellect etc., are good only insofar as they are used well or used by a good will. Kant here seems to be focusing on the agent's will and his motives and intentions. He

affirms that the good will is always unconditionally good, irrespective of the consequences of the action it prompts the agent to perform.

One important feature of Kant's ethical theory in general and his idea of the good will is their affinity with our ordinary moral reasoning. We all are familiar with these ideas which Kant makes more explicit by exposing its structure with a profound philosophical analysis. He claims that he is only making explicit a truth, which is implicitly present in ordinary moral knowledge.

As mentioned above, according to Kant a good will is itself an intrinsically good whole and it is good even when it exists quite alone. Hence the question "what makes good will good?" is not very easy to answer. Kant makes the "unconditionality" as a prerequisite in his conception of moral law and good will. Therefore, he opposes consequentialism that makes the results to which an action leads as the central element in assessing its moral worth. According to him, this would make good will hypothetical or assertorial.

Kant announces that the moral law is categorical and he asserts its absolute authority. He claims that, what makes willing right is that it must be based on a rational principle. According to him the moral law is a law of reason. He treats man as fundamentally a rational being and therefore, to obey the dictates of reason is not only desirable, but is categorical. Moreover, the universe where man finds himself is also constructed on rational principles. Hence the ultimate criterion that makes an action right must be its performance in reverence to the law of reason. In other words, it must be performed for the sake of duty. This is the function of practical reason according to Kant.

Practical reason affirms that, only rational actions are morally right and therefore, in order to prove that an action is right we have to prove that it is rational. Kant specifically affirms that no other criterion or contingent factor like emotions, inclinations, circumstances etc., should be referred to while assessing the moral worth of an action. This condition of rational accordance needs to be further elaborated. According to Kant, a right action must be universally right. It must be same for every individual, irrespective of tastes, inclinations or circumstances. It should be definitely in accordance with duty. But an action in accordance with duty need not necessarily be a morally right action. Here Kant makes a distinction between actions which are **in accordance with duty** and actions which are **done for the sake of duty**. The former are performed for the achievement of certain goals and certain ends, although they might conform to the dictates of reason and duty. For instance, I may spend a lot of money for helping the needy fellow human beings, which is my duty as a human being. But I do this not for the sake of duty, but for gaining recognition and fame in the society. Such an action, although it is in accordance with duty, would not qualify to be called as morally right according to Kant's criteria, as they

are not unconditionally right or good. Such actions cannot claim moral worth. Kant affirms that moral actions are actions that are performed for the sake of duty. He insists that performance of duty is unconditional: **Duty for the sake of duty.**

In other words, morally good actions are performed by an agent with the knowledge that it was dutiful and not just because he was inclined towards performing such actions or he performed them desiring certain results or preventing certain undesirable consequences of not honouring duty. This is a very interesting aspect of Kant's moral theory and it brings out his emphasis on reason. Kant is aware that good inclination or altruism may lead one to be good and to do one's duty. Some people are by nature inclined to do good and perform their duty without any reference to consequences. Such actions are said to be springing from inclination. But Kant's rational moral theory does not accept such actions as morally worthy. Here there is an apparent contrast between duty and inclination.

Kant argues that our inclinations are determined by our physical and psychological nature and he says that we cannot choose them. He stresses on the aspect of choice and affirms that our choices should be rational. Since human beings are rational creatures, the obedience to a rational and universal law is unconditionally binding.

But, the reason which Kant mentions here is not the theoretical reason which he analysed in his first *Critique*—the reason that constitutes the object given in intuition—but is **Practical or Moral Reason** that is concerned with the production of moral choices or decisions in accordance with the law which proceeds from itself. It is necessarily directed towards a choice in accordance with the moral law that is universal. Kant argues that practical reason influences the will as it moves the latter by identifying itself with it and by means of the moral imperative it makes the will a rational power. The practical reason or rational will is therefore the foundation of the moral law.

Kant's idea of moral duty can be elaborated in this context. According to him, duty is the necessity of acting out of reverence for the universal moral law, which admits of no exceptions. The distinction between "actions in accordance with duty" and "actions for the sake of duty" becomes more apparent here. In order to perform actions for the sake of duty one has to rationally comprehend what is the dutiful action on a particular context. Since it is unconditional, it must be performed in reverence to the universal moral command, which alone is the right choice. It is to "act in accordance with the idea of law", which rational beings alone are capable of.

The moral law is grounded in practical reason, which means that it is based on a principle on which all men would act if they were purely rational moral agents. To understand this clearly let us

examine what actually happens when we make moral choices in our actual life. We make a choice and act on the basis of a maxim, which is a subjective principle of volition. It is this maxim which determines his decisions. But this subjective principle of volition need not be in agreement with the universal moral law and for Kant actions are morally worthy only if they are performed out of reverence for the law. The moral law is presented as a categorical imperative and the practical reason commands its performance which we who are rational creatures are obliged to honour. This acting out of reverence for law is duty and in the performance of duty one is expected to overcome all other factors like passions, inclinations and desires that are in conflict with the moral command.

On the one hand, our actions are based on maxims that are subjective principle of volition and on the other hand to be morally right they have to be in accordance with the idea of law. In other words, for the will to be morally good, we should will that our maxims, should become universal laws and they have to be in accordance with the moral law. And if the actions governed by the maxim obey the universal moral law, then it will have moral worth. Such actions are then performed “for the sake of duty” by rational creatures, as only rational creatures can consciously perform actions for the sake of duty.

Here Kant encounters a problem. There could be a discrepancy between the objective principles of morality and a man's maxims or subjective principles of volition. Consequently, the objective principles of morality need not always govern our actions. We sometimes act on maxims or subjective principles of volition which are incompatible with the objective principles of morality. In other words, the will does not necessarily follow the dictate of reason. This problem has led him to think of formulating, what is the core of his moral philosophy; the categorical imperative.

### **Formulating the Categorical Imperative**

In the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant formulates the categorical imperative in three different ways. The first form of the categorical imperative is the universal law formulation. It states the following:

#### **Universal Law formulation**

*Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law*

This first formulation can be further elaborated in two ways, emphasizing the universality aspect.

1. Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law
2. Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature

Here the test of the rightness of an action consists in seeing whether we are prepared to ensure that everybody else should adopt the rule, on which we perform the action, as our own rule of action. Hence it stresses on avoiding inconsistencies. It is logically inconsistent to adopt a moral principle for ourselves and to refuse to adopt that same principle for other people. We should also be able to universalize the principle. For example, it is inconsistent to refuse to repay borrowed money, as the institution of money-lending could not go on if everybody refused to pay his debts.

The second formulation highlights the importance of considering the humanity as end in itself. It states that:

### Humanity as End in Itself formulation

*Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.*

This formulation summons to treat every rational being including oneself, always as an end, and never as a mere means. In other words, it stresses that we should not use a rational being as a mere means, as though he had no value in himself except as a means to my subjective end. This principle is applicable for oneself as well as for others. For example, in suicide, one uses oneself, a person, as a mere means to the end, which is the maintenance of tolerable conditions up to the end of life. Similarly, the man who makes a promise to another one to get his things done, but does not keep it, makes the other person a means.

The assumption behind this is the notion of the kingdom of ends. He assumes the existence of a kingdom of the systematic union of rational beings through common laws. Kant conceives every rational being as both member and sovereign in this kingdom of ends. He is a member because, although giving laws, he is also subject to them. He is a sovereign because, while legislating, he is not subject to the will of any other, but only to his own rational self.

### **The Postulates of Practical Reason**

The postulates of morality are ideas that transcend the limitations of reason in its theoretical use, as the latter operates only in the phenomenal domain of reality. The postulates of morality are therefore, postulates of reason in its practical or moral use.

For example, the idea of freedom, according to Kant is a practical necessity. He maintains that it is not possible to arrive at any theoretical proof for freedom. Nor can we disprove freedom. Kant says that the condition of the possibility of a categorical imperative is to be found in the idea of freedom, as without freedom we cannot act morally, which is equivalent to acting for the sake of duty. Kant famously states that “an ought presupposes a can”. According to him, moral obligation presupposes that we have the freedom to obey or disobey the law and we can make universal laws only if we are free. In other words, practical reason must regard itself as free and the concept of categorical imperative presupposes the idea of freedom.

The second postulate of morality is immortality, which Kant establishes in an indirect manner. He argues that the moral law commands us to pursue virtue. According to him, virtue consists in being in complete accordance of will and feeling with the moral law. Such a complete accordance or perfection is impossible to achieve in the span of one single life time. The perfect good must be realized in the form of an indefinite, unending progress towards the ideal. This naturally presupposes the unending duration of the existence of the same individual. This is immortality of the soul, which is a postulate of the pure practical reason. According to Kant, this is not demonstrable by reason in its theoretical use. But at the same time, we cannot deny its practical value, as to deny immortality is to deny moral law.

The third postulate is the existence of God. Here again Kant refers to the idea of preconditions. He reminds us that the concept of moral law demands that virtue and happiness are necessarily connected *a priori* and are not based on actual situations and conditions. Happiness is the state of a rational being in the world with whom in the totality of his existence everything goes according to his wish and will. It envisages a harmony of physical nature with man's wish and will. This condition does not happen without the possibility of a God who oversees such connections and harmony. It presupposes an *a priori* synthetic connection between virtue and happiness, so that happiness will follow and be proportioned to virtue. The possibility of such an *a priori* connection demands that we must postulate the existence of a cause of the whole of nature who is God. Therefore, God is the ground of the connection of happiness with morality. God, according to Kant, apportions happiness to morality according to the conception of law. Happiness is to be apportioned to morality. Kant conceives God as omniscient and omnipotent. He maintains that God is the cause of nature and is capable of bringing into existence a world in which happiness is exactly proportioned to virtue.

All the three postulates of morality proceed from the principle of morality, which is a law. Kant maintains that these postulates, though have no role to play in pure reason, have immense practical value. They extend our knowledge from a practical point of view and suggest us what ought to be done. Kant develops his deontological ethics by rejecting the consequentialist approaches in ethics, with the help of these postulates, with the idea of a



good will and with the notion of categorical imperative. Kant's objective was to develop an ethical theory and ground it on human reason. Reflecting the spirit of the transcendental approach, Kant looks for the *a priori* conditions that make an action unconditionally good.

But the stress on such *a priori* conditions raises certain difficulties. It makes his ethical theory too formalistic and abstract, which ultimately made it difficult to deal with choices made in practical life. In our day to day life, we encounter highly complex situations where making the right ethical choice is an extremely difficult task. Kant's theory demands that ethical choices can be made independent of the situations and contexts where we encounter them. Choices are right or wrong *a priori*.

Again, Kant's idea of practical reason demands that the postulates of morality cannot be proved. One may wonder in what sense they are rational? Kant's idea of reason suggests that the pure or theoretical reason is different from practical reason. Therefore, Kant's conception of enlightenment rationality envisages a fragmentation of the human rational faculty. This may further lead to a fragmentation of the human self and also the society, a rift which threatens the very project of modernity.

## Quiz

1. According to Kant, the ideas of reason?  
(a) Are proved by theoretical reason (b) Are constitutive and regulative (c) Make our experience possible (d) Are related to pure reason.
2. According to Kant, what makes an action right?  
(a) It leads to good and desirable consequences (b) It is in accordance with the duty of the person who performed it (c) It is performed for the sake of duty (d) The performer of the action is a virtuous individual.
3. Which of the following is not true according to Kant?  
(a) Morals are independent of how the world functions (b) Morals are unconditionally universal and rational (c) How the world functions is nonmoral (d) The basis of morals are in metaphysical truths.
4. The first form of the categorical imperative emphasizes:  
(a) Avoiding inconsistencies (b) Treating rational beings as ends (c) Kingdom of ends (d) Desirable consequences.
5. Which among the following statements is not related to Kant's notion of freedom?  
[a] Without freedom we cannot act morally [b] We are condemned to be free [c] We are free to do anything [d] Human freedom is a postulate of morality.
6. Which of the following statements are true of Kant?  
[i] Everything in the world goes in according to the wish and will of God.  
[ii] There is an *a priori* synthetic connection between virtue and happiness.  
[iii] God apportions happiness to morality according to the conception of law.

[iv] Happiness and sorrows are rewards and punishments from God.

(a) [i], [ii] and [iii] (b) [i] and [ii] (c) [ii] and [iii] (d) All the four.

### **Answer Key**

1. [b]
2. [c]
3. [d]
4. [a]
5. [c]
6. [c]

### **Assignments**

1. Explain the concept of the postulates of morality.
2. Discuss the notion of categorical imperative and its different formulations.

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