

## KANT'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY: AIMS, METHODS AND SOME CORE CONCEPTS

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Kant's moral theories are rooted mainly in his work *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is the work from which he started developing his moral theories. Kant's moral theories always take rational principles as the moral standard on the basis of which one can act or judge his or her action. Rationality plays a vital role in his moral philosophy. According to his moral philosophy, irrational principle can never be a moral standard on the basis of which one can act or judge his or her action. Therefore, according to Kant's view, morality is completely rational in nature and what is irrational is always immoral.

Thus, Kant's moral philosophy also explores the concept of reason. In his pre-critical writings Kant believed that moral judgments are based on sentiment, which we come across in his work '*Observation on the sentiment of the beautiful and sublime*'. But he was in opinion that moral judgment cannot completely be rooted in sentiment rather it must have its foundation in some strict rational principles. When he came in contact with Hume's objection concerning universality of knowledge, he started working out his own system to be escaped from dogmatic slumber. His attempt to establish his own system in philosophy paved the way to *Critique of Practical Reason*. Hume's objection concerning universality of knowledge or cognition compelled him to investigate into the nature of cognition, which again leads him to make a distinction between sensitive (empirical) and intellectual (metaphysical) knowledge. Kant says moral concepts are all metaphysical in nature and moral concepts are based on metaphysical concepts not on empirical concepts. Kant assigns this metaphysical concept to reason, and says, reason supplies some fixed judgment which is neither deduced internally nor induced externally from experience but inherent in rational being and completely rational in nature. Other philosophers, such as, Locke and Hobbes also argued that, moral principles are based on standard of rationality; however, these standards are either based on instrumental principles or based on rational intuitions. Kant argued that moral principles must conform to rational principles or non-instrumental principles [categorical imperative]. Here Kant meant to say that a rational will must be autonomous or free in sense that it is the author of the law that binds it. Thus, according to Kant, fundamental principle of morality is categorical imperative and categorical imperative is none other than the law of an autonomous will. Thus in Kant's moral philosophy we find that, conception of reason gets greater importance and its reach in practice goes beyond than that of Hume's notion of Slave to Passion.

**Kant's moral philosophy: aims and methods**

From the very first two chapters of Kant's *The Groundwork*, it is possible to assume that the first aim of his moral philosophy must be the formulation of precise fundamental principle of metaphysics of morals. This work is being developed by Kant by analyzing the commonsense ideas of morality on the basis of which ordinary people make judgment. Kant endeavors it with the analysis of such principles on which all the ordinary judgments are based and all ordinary human beings would pass the judgment. When we go through the third and final chapters of *The Groundwork*, we can easily trace out the second aim of his moral philosophy. If we deeply analyze these two chapters of *Groundwork*, then we find that the formulation of basic fundamental principle as required by our rational will is the second basic aim of Kant's moral philosophy. In formulating the fundamental principle as required by our rational will, Kant emphasizes autonomy of will. Kant says that, autonomy of will is vital element in it and asserts that, rational will is always autonomous.

Besides these two fundamental aims of moral philosophy, there is another aim of moral philosophy in Kant's mind as to "what ought I to do?". To answer this question, Kant deals with the facts from *Groundwork* and also in the *Metaphysics of morals*. Kant's *Moral Philosophy* examines the demands of Morality that prevails in human social and psychological life. Questions of the demands of the Morality and its psychological and social impacts in human life is found discussed in *Second Critique*, *Metaphysics of Morals* and also found in *Anthropology from Pragmatic Point of View*. Final aim of Kant's *Moral Philosophy* is to enlighten the people about the final or ultimate end or goal of human life. In this regard, Kant establishes the concept of highest good and its relation to moral life.

Kant's aims of *Moral Philosophy* that we discussed above, needs some scientific methods to be employed to aim at it. He always aimed at employing *a priori* method to achieve the aims of his *Moral Philosophy*. He suggests here that an observation or external method is not capable of achieving and formulating the fundamental principles of morality. When we seek out and establish the fundamental principle *a priori* then we may apply this to consult the facts drawn from experiences in order to determine how to apply these principles to human life to the conclusion about how we ought to act in a particular situation in general. Some reasons can be noted here for his being involved in adopting the *a priori* method in *Moral*

Philosophy. First reason, undoubtedly, would be that Moral Philosophy would have become more or less a study of nature and structure of moral reality if observation methods were employed to study it. In his Moral Philosophy we find the question as to what is 'duty', what is 'value', what is 'good' and also their kinds and categorization. This makes his theory metaphysical and it is the matter of fact that metaphysical principles are formulated or established by *a priori* method.

### **Good will:**

Concept of good will is the key point in Kant's moral philosophy. Precise meaning of the term good will cannot be compared with the ordinarily and commonly accepted terms like intelligence, courage etc. as talents of mind. Good will, according to Kant is the will which is good unconditionally. Quality of mind does not guarantee good will. Good will does not depend upon the qualities of mind. Sometimes ordinary person can get confused in contemplating the meaning of the term good will with some desirable things like power, riches, honour, health and general well-being. These are the desirable but not good unless it is corrected by our good will. Though these give pleasure and lead to some happy end, they cannot be considered as good if there is no good will to govern it. Some quality in our ethical life is very much desirable, and good in some respect, such as emotions, passions, self-comforts and calm deliberation. But these qualities are not good without qualifications. These qualities are not unconditional but depend on some conditions. Conditional quality cannot be good in itself.

Good will is good in itself and it is good not because it accompanies some end; it is good because it is good in itself. Good will is incomparably higher than anything which could be brought about by inclination towards something or depending upon some condition. It is like a jewel which shines in its own right. So, in this regard Kant says that, possession of good will makes a good person good and he makes decision on the basis of moral law. When one acts on the basis of this moral law, he is held to be morally worthy. Under no other condition we can claim our moral goodness as worth having to attain some desirable ends. We see different other qualities such as courage, power, cleverness, intelligence, pleasure but these qualities are not worthy because of their being dependent upon some conditions. These qualities are not unconditional. Most important thing to be borne in mind here is that

possessing moral goodness is the very condition under which anything is considered as worthy. Other desirable qualities such as intelligence, power, pleasure, courage are worthy if and only if these qualities are unconditional or do not require or do not aim at fulfilling some desirable ends. In another sense, these are worth having only on the condition that they conform to fundamental moral laws or moral conviction. Therefore, Kant concludes that good will is good in itself and shines on its own right. It is unconditional, does not depend upon any condition. It requires nothing to make itself good.

### **Duty:**

According to Kant, an action has real moral worth if it is done from duty. If a person's action conforms to good will and good will is motivated by the thought of duty where moral law is decisive; action can be considered as having moral worth. So, thought of duty plays a vital and influential role in Kant's moral philosophy. We have already discussed the concept or precise meaning of good will and its role in Kant's moral philosophy. Here we need to take the help of good will to explore Kant's concept of duty. Duty is always associated with some sort of motives. We have different sorts of motivation out of which one acts. Our aim here is to find thought of duty out of which worth having action could be done. Here in this context Kant says, there are different sorts of motives, such as, motive of self-interest, happiness, sympathy etc. and actions done out of such motives are however sometimes praiseworthy, but they do not express good will.

Kant, therefore, turns his attention to the concept of duty which is, for, him is the salient feature of moral consciousness. He, further, divides actions into two; action in accordance with duty and action performed for the sake of duty. Action done in accordance with duty has no moral worth because it may be done on the ground that –honesty is the best policy. Therefore, Kant says that actions performed for the sake of duty only have moral worth. It has been explained by an example- To save one's life is a duty and everyone has inclination to save his life. In this case, if one saves his life due to inclination to do so, then his action has no moral worth. Act of preserving one's life will have moral worth if and only if it is performed as a duty to save his life. Therefore, one thing becomes clear here that the action performed in accordance with duty is not compatible with it and action has moral worth which is

done for the sake of duty. In this situation one thing should be made clear that Kant's assertion is not that all actions which are performed in accordance with inclinations are immoral. Moral worth of an action depends on the increase and decrease of inclination to perform action. Lesser is the inclination, greater the moral worth.

### **Categorical Imperative:**

Kant's concept of imperative can be derived from his theory of subjective and objective principles of practical reason and concepts of different goodness in respect of these theories. To grasp the meanings of subjective and objective principles it is necessary to enquire into the meaning of 'principle' itself. A principle is a universal proposition under which other propositions are grounded. It is an absolute ground above which there are no other higher grounds. Kant conceives this principle as subjective and objective principles. Subjective principles are the real ground of our action and are at work in our action. An agent always chooses subjective principle to act as it is confined only to an individual. Objective principles are the principles on which every rational agent acts if reason has full control over his passion. Thus, objective principles, according to Kant are open not only to an individual but also are to every rational agent. Kant introduces 'maxim' as a technical name for subjective principle and it is a kind of principle. Maxim differs from objective principle in its being valid only for the individual agent. Objective principles are valid for every rational agent. Kant believes that a rational agent always acts in accordance with some maxim. This maxim is of two kinds: (1) material and (2) formal. Material maxim is *a posteriori* or empirical as it is based on sensuous inclination or some desired ends. Formal maxim is not based experience of desires, hence it is *a priori*. According to Kant if someone acts in accordance with principle, he acts for duty's sake. He again says each rational agent has a will which is a capacity to act in accordance with some principle. Definition of will raises the question of what kind of principle in accordance with which one is supposed to act. Subjective principles are of course not considered because a holy will doesn't poses maxim or subjective principle. As a holy will doesn't poses maxim, a will as such may not be in capacity to act in accordance with law or principle. A holy will again is not subject to sensuous influences. It is finite will determined by objective principle, is a capacity to act in accordance with laws or principles. Thus, a finite will, determined by objective

principle, is the capacity to act in accordance with principle and representation of this objective principle is *Command*, according to Kant. Kant again says, to be a command it must be valid and it must have normative force for the agent. This principle which corresponds to the representation of law in case of finite will is *imperative*. Imperative on the basis of the nature of objective principles and goods are of two kinds: hypothetical imperative and categorical imperative. When objective principle is conditioned by an end; the imperative is called hypothetical imperative. When an action is performed for the sake of duty without reference to any end, imperative becomes categorical imperative. Categorical imperative is unconditional and uncaused by any desired ends. Kant says this kind of categorical imperative takes the general form 'every rational agent ought to will the action good in itself'.

In Kant's Moral Philosophy autonomy of will is like a mirror through which all other concepts reflect. As we have discussed earlier, imperatives which are motivated by inclination or desires are hypothetical, that is conditional or depends on some conditions. He says, categorical imperative must be unconditional and should not be determined by any inclinations and interests. Here one thing will be clear that, the 'will' which obeys categorical imperative should also not be determined by any interests. It must be autonomous, that is, it must give itself law which it obeys. We can put it in another sense that categorical imperative which do not contain autonomy of will is meaningless. Therefore, Kant says autonomy of will is the supreme principle of morality. Kant's concept of autonomy of will is always expressed in the formulation of imperative.

Kant's moral philosophy makes epoch making history in the field of moral philosophy by giving totally new and critical way of thought. His critical thought and new way of contemplating moral concepts and reconciliation of traditional and modern moral concepts enhanced moral Philosophy towards a new and rational dimension. Concepts of duty, good will, Categorical imperative and autonomy of will are the fundamental concepts of moral philosophy from the unknown antiquity and these concepts were undefined and unorganized since then. Advent of Kant's new and critical method in moral philosophy gave new orientation to them and these concepts get organized and well defined in the light of Philosophy and Ethics.

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