

## Abstract

### Title of the Research Proposal:

### Relation Between Ethics of Duty and Ethics of Virtue: A Critical Study

#### Introduction:

There are three major areas of ethics, meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. Normative ethics is the study of action which deals with the questions like how one ought to act or how one ought to morally speak. It is concerned with the criterions of what is morally right or wrong for us. There are varieties of normative ethical theories such as, consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics. Consequentialism holds that the consequences of one's actions are the only foundational criteria to determine the rightness and wrongness of an action. According to the Consequentialists, an act is morally right if and only if it produces a good consequence. If the act does not produce the comparative amount of good consequences or it does not produce the comparative amount of good over evil then it is not the kind of right action. According to Frankena, "Thus, an act is *right* if and only if it or the rule under which it falls produces, will probably produce, or is intended to produce *at least as great a balance of good over evil* as any available alternative; an act is wrong if and only if it does not do so."<sup>1</sup>

#### Deontological theory:

Criticisms of consequential theory give rise to the deontological theory. The etymological meaning of the word 'deontology' is dependent upon two Greek words 'deon' and 'logos'. In Greek language 'deon' means duty and 'logos' means science, so deontology means the science of duty. According to the critics of consequential theory, it is so much engaged with ends that it may overshadow the means by which the ends could be achieved. Deontological

---

<sup>1</sup> Frankena, William K., *Ethics*, Prentice-Hall India, New Delhi, 1997, p. 14

theorists do not agree with the consequentialist theorists. They deny that, an action is right by the consequences it produces. They argue that an action can be right or wrong depending upon the reasons besides the goodness or badness it produces. For example – to keep a promise is just, and thus, promise keeping is a right action without depending on its consequences. This type of action is right but its rightness is not due to its consequence. Consequentialists generally accepted the myth that, there is only one criterion to judge an act, whether it is right or wrong. They basically depend upon a non-moral comparative value. Deontologists do not believe that this characteristic is reliable; rather they believe that there are also other more pertinent characteristics to be considered to determine whether an act is right or wrong. Deontologists say that, “the principle of maximizing the balance of good over evil, no matter for whom, is either not a moral criterion or standard at all, or, at least, it is not the only basic or ultimate one.”<sup>2</sup> Deontological ethics and consequential ethics are thus opposite of one another. If consequentialism tells us to emphasize on the consequences of individual work, deontology tells us to consider only act without being considering its consequences.

### **Kantian deontology:**

Kant’s moral theory lays emphasis on human reason. For Kant, one act can be called moral if it is done in accordance with reason. And being a rational agent, one must follow the moral rules prescribed by practical reason. If one does not follow this criterion then it is obviously considered as an irrational act, and consequently an immoral act. Kant’s philosophy is basically concerned about duty performed by a rational agent and this is the reason why Kant’s theory is regarded as a form of deontology. The principles of Kant’s theoretical as well as practical philosophy are *a priori*. To be *a priori*, according to Kant, is to be strictly universal and necessary (meaning the contrary of which is inconceivable). According to Kant, the general principle of the moral law, i.e., the categorical imperative, is derived from practical reason, and is, therefore, obligatory for every rational agent that poses the same practical reasons. So, every rational agent or human being is obliged by the moral law. But what does

---

<sup>2</sup> Frankena, William K., *Ethics*, Prentice-Hall India, New Delhi, 1997, p. 15

Kant mean by the moral law? In one word, the moral law is Categorical Imperative. Categorical Imperative is a set of principle, these are – respect the humanity in oneself as well as in other rational agents, not to make an exception for himself while deliberating others about how to perform an act, and act only in accordance with rules that could be universally obeyed.

All rational agents are obliged by the moral law, but this moral law is not imposed upon them by any other external cause. Kant believes that moral laws are imposed by rationality, the inner self of man. Here Kant says about the autonomy of will. The moral law which Kant discusses requires both freedom of the will as well as autonomy of the will.

### **Virtue theory:**

Virtue ethics is a revised version of what Aristotle thinks about morality. For him, human flourishing can be achieved by the habitual practice of moral and intellectual virtue. Though Aristotle is treated as the protagonist of virtue ethics, it does not mean that he was the first person to deal with this topic. He was the first philosopher who discussed ethics as a separate part of philosophy and the different kinds of virtues that form our good life. *Nicomachean Ethics* is the name normally given to Aristotle's best known work and central text for the study of ancient virtue ethics. There is another book on ethics, the *Eudemian Ethics*, which has been written by Aristotle. It is commonly believed that *Eudemian Ethics* is written before the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The first one was named after Aristotle's son Nicomachus, and the second one is named after his friend Eudemus, who may also have had a hand in editing the final work. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is not easy reading for the new comer students, it was meant for the audience of advance students who were sufficiently familiar with Aristotle's philosophy and terminology. Both the works of Aristotle are important to understand the Greek virtue ethics.

According to Aristotle, virtue is neither a passion nor a faculty, it is a state of character. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle offers a definition of virtue thus – "Virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle,

i.e. by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.”<sup>3</sup> Aristotle’s definition proposes to adopt a middle path which has been much discussed. Virtue is considered as if it lies between two vices which are two extremes. For example, courage is the middle path between the extremes of rashness and cowardice. Such a middle course will be relative to vices of the extremes depending upon the actual circumstances of the individual.

According to Bertrand Russell, there are two kinds of virtues, intellectual and moral, corresponding to the two parts of the soul. Intellectual virtues result from teaching, moral virtues from habit. The two kinds of virtue in Aristotle’s ethics, that are responsible for the quality of life is –

- i. ‘Ethical virtues’ or ‘virtues of character’ that regulate the desires concerning the ends to be attained or avoided by action, and
- ii. ‘Intellectual virtues’ (*Phronêsis*), the capacity of the soul’s rational part that selects the means to realize those ends. According to Aristotle, a virtue of character is the irrational part of the soul, having the characteristic of “listening to reasons advice”.

### **Previous studies on this topic:**

Alasdair MacIntyre, has done the most to reintroduce virtue ethics, argues that utilitarianism cannot distinguish between the clear qualitative difference between the internal value of the virtues and the extrinsic value of ordinary pleasures, a difference crucial to what is called "character consequentialism." Whereas it is virtually impossible to do the hedonic calculus for ordinary pains and pleasures, there is no question about the long-term good consequences of the virtues and good character, as compared to the long-term pain that the vices bring. This means that attempts, such as Michael

---

<sup>3</sup> Ross, David (Trans.), *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. ix, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009

Slote's gallant effort, at founding the value of the virtues on their own grounds fails, because one cannot deny that the virtues were preferred, very early in human social development, primarily because of their good consequences.

There are two opposite views regarding the relationships between Kant and virtue ethics. Many Kantian interpreters think that Kant is just a pure deontologist and has nothing to offer to virtue theory. But there are also few interpreters who think that Kantian ethics has all the possibilities by which it can be considered as a virtue ethics. The former view limits Kant's contributions to current debates to a very restricted sphere and the latter view suggests an expansion of the possible contributions of Kantian ethics. The latter view also opens the moral sentiments and questions of character to the Kantian thinking.

Kantian ethics has long been criticized from the perspective of virtue and other ethical theories. For the critics, Kant is a pure deontologist ethicist. It is generally accepted that Kant has nothing to offer to the virtue theory. For example, according to the communitarian philosopher Michael Sandel "Kant's conception of morality is asocial and ahistorical because he gives all his efforts to emancipate the individual from the community". Hegel has also tried to bridge the gap between the individuals and the community. Philippa Foot and Simon Blackburn are those who consider Kant as only a deontologist and severely criticizing his theory. In this proposal we will deal with this issue.

According to the orthodox interpretation of Kant, morality can be derived only from a non-empirical standard of rationality, i.e., the Categorical Imperative. It is the highest principle of moral action. Rationality is the conceptual feature of our willing to decide what is right for us. Reason and only reason decides the standard of rightness, independently of any empirical inclinations and dispositions of the agent. Hence it is clear that all our duties could be derived from reason, and their justification is independent of any empirical facts about one's emotion or other characteristics.

Kantian ethics is exclusively about moral duty and his primary concern is about how one must act but not a type of person one should be. All duties

are derived from reason independent of any psychological attitude. This view suggests that morality is governed by only rule alone. The only good motive is about duty. We should do our duty out of respect for the rule, not out of imitation to virtuous person, or even not out of nobility and honour. Our moral life must be governed by strict moral rules which holds good for everyone and equally without exception. Thus, Kant's moral rule is very rigid and bereft of sympathy and psychological attitude.

According to the contemporary virtue-ethicist, virtue, either as a generalized disposition or as a set of particular traits of a person, simply does not figure as a core feature of Kant's moral theory. Virtue ethics mainly concentrates on the intrinsic or inherent character, or what kind of person one should be. It discusses the ideal of how to live well, and this might be the difference by what we can differentiate virtue ethics from other ethical concept, such as deontology or consequentialism. Virtue ethics deals with the idea of human flourishing. It does not put emphasis on right or duty, or value or the good. For this ethics the ideal of a person is more fundamental. Accordingly, with the help of an ideal of the person one could judge, what actions are right, and what things are good. The ideal or standard of right action is determined by performing the action, no matter what an entirely virtuous person would be. The ideal of the person must be independent of any understanding of the right or the good.

Kant provides the non-empirical foundation to the ethical theory. He exercised himself to analyse the rational will and a conception of self-governing reason rather than discuss about the kind of a person one should be. So, it is enough for the critics of Kant to claim that he should not be considered as a virtue ethicist and they may not be altogether wrong, but it would be hasty to conclude that virtue does not play any important role in Kantian ethics. Our aim is to shed some new light on Kant's moral theory, especially to the role played by virtue in his ethical theories.

But in the proposed research we will argue that, Kant has paid equal importance to both the ethics of duty and the ethics of virtue. Kant's work on virtue has been ignored by the most of his interpreters as they paid full attention

to his ethics of duty, which is characterized as deontology. Many consider Kant's ethics as formalism. But in our discussion, we will try to show that Kant's ethical theory is not just based upon the rules but upon agents and the kind of life they live.

Generally, we think that the ethics of duty and the ethics of virtue are opposed to each other and they are mutually exclusive alternatives. But Kantian ethics is not like that, Kantian ethics emphasizes on both of them. Our opinion is that it is not necessary to choose between rule ethics and virtue ethics, because Kant's ethics is able to combine both of them. Here we want to develop Kant's ethical theory as an agent-centred ethics by making reference to the good will, the maxims, morally necessary ends and the relation between virtue and good.

### **Virtue ethical thoughts in the *Dharmaśāstras*:**

According to Bimal Krishna Matilal the term *dharma*, is understood nothing short of moral virtue. Martha Nussbaum, a major proponent of virtue ethics, states: "The good agent must therefore cultivate the ability to perceive and correctly describe his or her situation finely and truly, including in this perceptual grasp even those features of the situation that are not covered under the existing rule." Aristotle's practical reason is the ability to perceive "finely and truly" any situation, whereas Buddhists would call it the virtue of mindfulness and the Confucians would say that it is doing "what is appropriate". If *dharma* is duty, then Hindu ethics should conform to something like duty-based ethics, but Matilal maintains that it is not really the meaning of *dharma* which will be discussed in the proposed research. Matilal quotes Robert Lingat favourably when he maintains that *dharma* is never "imposed" but simply "proposed"; and he paraphrases Louis Dumont idea that *dharma* "reigns from above without actually governing the world." Both of these descriptions are intriguing but vague, but Matilal proposes that *dharma* is "open ended," a crucial aspect of rules in virtue ethics in the *Dharmaśāstras*.

As opposed to a rule-based ethics, where the most that we can know is that we always fall short of the norm, virtue ethics is truly a voyage of personal discovery. Ancient virtue ethics always aim at a personal mean that is a creative choice for each individual. Virtue ethics is emulative - using the sage or savior as a model for virtue - whereas rule ethics involves conformity and obedience. The emulative approach engages the imagination and personalizes and thoroughly grounds individual moral action and responsibility. Such an ethics naturally lends itself to Matilal's moral poets and virtue aesthetics: the crafting of a good and beautiful soul, a unique gem among other gems.

### **Research gap and problems:**

Though most of the Kantian interpreters think that Kant was just a deontologist but it is very difficult to agree with them. We will discuss what Kant actually says about virtue, not only showing his high estimation of virtue but also showing the centrality of virtue, in his practical ethics. Kant's position on good will is considered generally as act-centered ethics and for which it is criticized by many philosophers. But I argue that Kant's good will offers us a clear view of agent-centered ethics which is contrary to the act-centered ethics, though Kantian philosophy is identified with the doctrine of formal duty, not with a judgment like what one ought to do.

We will try to show that virtue is the central theme of Kantian ethics and the foundation of all types of moral judgments. However, this is not contradictory to Kantian ethics but it is defined in accordance with the moral law. Therefore, I will try to show how Kant combines rules and duties concerning different acts in his virtue ethics.

Kant's virtue theory reveals the mystery of human morality. According to Kant, rational beings, such as human are also finite rational beings. In his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant opines, "We know of only one species of rational being on earth; namely, the human species". On the other hand, the unearthly rational beings are omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent. According to Kant, "For finite holy beings (who could never be tempted to violate the duty) there would be no doctrine of virtue but only a



doctrine of morals”. “Only the moral relations of human beings to human beings” and “human duties to one another” is called ethics.

In the preface of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant opines, “Intending to publish someday *Metaphysics of Morals*, I issue this *Groundwork* in advance.”<sup>4</sup> This is just a preliminary step for future *Metaphysics of Morals*. It is purely theoretical and may be considered as foundation for future moral studies. Kant believes, ‘as a philosopher, he has to go to the first grounds of this concept of duty, since otherwise neither certitude nor purity can be expected anywhere in the doctrine of virtue’. This supreme moral principle leads to legal rights and moral duty. Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* is another important work which presupposes the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. On the basis of my observations, these following thoughts may be considered as research gap.

- Is Kant be interpreted as a virtue ethicist?
- If we are able to reinterpret Kant as a virtue ethicist, how can we relate his ethics of deontology with virtue theory?
- What is the relationship between ethics of duty and ethics of virtue?
- Is Kant’s ethics of duty is considered as ethics of virtue then what would be the case of other ethics of duty?
- What are the sound arguments for claiming that Kantian ethics is considered as virtue ethics?
- Can we consider ethics of duty is equivalent or identical with virtue ethics?
- Moral rules are too abstract and too rigid, and it is difficult to apply them to complex situations and decisions. They, however, still retain their normative force in the application of national and international

---

<sup>4</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*

law. In this context, question may be raised that what is the relation between Kant's virtue ethics and the virtues in the *Dharmaśāstras*.

*Laxmikanta Padhi*  
18/2/2022

**Prof. Laxmikanta Padhi**

Professor of Philosophy  
University of North Bengal

Dr. Laxmikanta Padhi  
Professor of Philosophy  
Deptt. of Philosophy  
University of North Bengal  
Siliguri-734013

*Sahabuddin Ahamed Jamader*

**Sahabuddin Ahamed Jamader**

SRF in State-Funded Research Scheme  
Department of Philosophy  
University of North Bengal