

The Ethics of Duty with Special Reference to Immanuel Kant

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ABSTRACT:

Ethics as the philosophical study of morality, examines questions concerning duty, obligation, right and wrong, good and evil, and virtue and vice. Within the broader framework of ethical thought, normative ethics provides principles for determining the moral worth of human actions, while applied ethics examines the practical implications of these principles in concrete moral situations. This paper focuses on the ethics of duty, particularly the deontological moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant grounds morality in reason and argues that the moral worth of an action does not depend upon its consequences but upon the good will and the intention to perform one's duty for the sake of duty itself. The paper examines Kant's concept of the categorical imperative, which constitutes the supreme principle of his moral philosophy and is expressed through the formulations of universal law, humanity as an end in itself, and the kingdom of ends. These principles provide the foundation for understanding moral obligation and human dignity. The paper further discusses Kant's distinction between perfect and imperfect duties, with particular attention to four fundamental duties: the duty to refrain from suicide, the duty to refrain from making false promises, the duty to develop one's talents, and the duty to help others. By examining these duties, the paper highlights Kant's rational and universal approach to morality and demonstrates the significance of duty, autonomy, and respect for humanity in ethical decision-making.

Keywords: Deontological, Moral Obligation, Categorical Imperative, Universal Law, Kingdom Of Ends, Autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

Ethics is defined as the study of moral behaviour or the science of morality. It is a subfield of philosophy that can be characterized as philosophical reflection on morality, moral issues, and moral conclusions. Duty or obligation, rightness or wrongness of an activity, good or bad, virtue and vice, etc. are all topics covered by ethics or moral philosophy.

It is possible to list three levels of moral thought. Metaethical thought is the initial stage. Some logical, epistemological, and semantic concerns, such as 'what is the meaning of the word 'good?' and 'how can ethical or moral judgments be justified?' are the focus of metaethical thinking. It is focused on the meaning of moral terms and moral judgments. Therefore, the metaphysics of morality is the focus of this stage. Metaethics is the term for this stage of morality.

Normative thinking is the second level. Asserting normative judgments like 'knowledge is good and ignorance is vice' or 'we should not tell lies' are examples of normative reasoning. Normative ethics is a category that includes these kinds of ethics. These categories examine deontological ethics, virtue ethics, and consequentialism, often known as teleological ethics.

The third stage is the stage of applied philosophical thinking related to morality. It is concerned with the study of practical ethical problems with reference to ethical theories. This type of ethics is named as applied ethics. Applied Ethics consists of the discussion of the application of normative ethical theories to practical moral problems. Applied Ethics is the philosophical study of the ethical controversies brought about by advances in biology, biotechnology, medicine, business, and environment and in the practice of law.

Here, in this article, I will discuss the ethics of duty with special reference to Immanuel Kant. Immanuel Kant (1724- 1804) is the greatest philosopher to emerge in German philosophy. It is universally accepted that he can be regarded as one of the greatest philosophers in the entire world. He is a critical philosopher who believes that reason is the ground of morality. Kant states that morality of our action determined by reason and not by emotion. According to him rightness of our action determined by ‘practical reason’.

The deontological ethics is basically concerned with the ethics of duty. By insisting upon the primacy of the right principle, Kant advocated a deontological theory of morals. According to Kant, “*The good will is the only jewels that shines by its own right.*” Everything else that is measured good by us is good either by deriving its goodness from the good will or by its association with good will. The ‘good will’ consists of a person’s ‘free will’ motivate purely by reason. Kant argues that no consequences can have fundamental moral worth; the only thing that is good in and of itself is the ‘good will’. The good will freely chooses to do its moral duty. Ethics of duty primarily concentrates on moral actions based on adherence to rules and duties.

Deontological ethics is a duty-based ethics. Deontological ethics derives from the Greek word 'deon' which means 'obligation' or 'duty'. Deontology in the context of ethics, asserts that some acts are morally obligatory irrespective of the results produced by the act. The supporters of deontological ethics include Immanuel Kant, W.D.Ross, Thomas Nagel, Roger Scruton etc. According to the deontologist, duty is prior to value and at least some of our duties, such as promise keeping are independent of values. The most important part of deontology or ethics of duty is our duties towards others.

Kant emphasizes performing one’s duty or obligation for the sake of duty alone — ‘duty for duty’s sake’. He asserts that all person must act not only in accordance with but for the sake of obligation. Kant’s duty ethics or the deontology consists of three principles which are known as Categorical Imperative. In his famous book *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant provides the three principles, or propositions. Each proposition of three principles of categorical imperative explicates his theory of moral worth. Thus, Kant’s supreme principle or moral law is a ‘categorical imperative’ that every moral agent recognizes in accepting an action as ethically obligatory. The following three principles are recognized as the categorical imperative of Kant’s ethics which is the core concept in his moral philosophy.

Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

For Kant, the rule of right behaviour is always to act in a manner in which we should with all other people to act. In a word, strictly moral behaviour is always founded on a universally applicable maxim. It is the formula of universal law of nature.

So, act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, never solely as a means but always also as an end. This is the formula of humanity.

So, act as if you were by your maxims in every case a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends. It is the formula of kingdom of ends.

Immanuel Kant asserts that there are four kinds of duties which are naturally follows from his three principles of categorical imperative: -

- The duty to refrain from suicide. For Kant refrain from suicide is a perfect or essential duty. This duty cannot be over ridden by any other duty.
- The duty to refrain from making false promises
- The duty to develop our talents
- The duty to help others.

Among these four types of duties, the duty to refrain from suicide and the duty to develop our talents are duties to ourselves. The duty to refrain from making false promises and the duty to help others are duties to others.

Kant distinguishes between two types of duties- perfect duties and imperfect duties (but not in essence imperfect). For him the perfect duties are strict obligation that must always be followed while imperfect duties are broader obligations that permit for flexibility in how and when they are fulfilled. Kant says, "I understand by a perfect duty one that admits no exception in favour of inclination." The imperfect duties are those which can be overridden by perfect duties or by imperfect duties but not by inclinations. For Kant refrain from suicide and refrain from making false promises are perfect duties. These two duties cannot be overridden by any other duty. The duty to develop our talents and the duty to help others are imperfect duties which can be overridden by any other perfect or imperfect duties.

Formalism (in ethics) is the doctrine that morality should be structured by a set of abstract principle of a high degree of generality. Formalism emphasizes on universal moral rules and principles. Thus, Kant's categorical imperative is one kind of formalism in ethics.

According to contextualism the primary focus of ethics is the concrete situation so that ethical judgment is not the application of general rules. Kant's rules of categorical imperative in essence are non-contextualized.

Although Kant's framework offers a strong basis for concepts like inherent human dignity, universal moral duties, and personal accountability, scholars frequently target it with several major objections:

One of the most frequent criticisms of Kantian ethics is its rigid and uncompromising nature. Kant maintains that moral duties are universally binding and should be followed irrespective of the particular circumstances or consequences involved. As a result, his ethical theory appears to allow little scope for making exceptions when exceptional situations arise. Kant evaluates the moral worth of an action mainly in terms of the intention and moral principle underlying it, rather than its outcome. Critics, however, contend that the consequences produced by an action also have significant moral relevance and therefore should not be entirely disregarded.

Critics contend that Kant does not sufficiently explain why every human being should be regarded and respected as a person. The fundamental question of why we are morally obligated to respect all persons remains inadequately addressed in his ethical theory. Consequently, Kant's failure to provide a satisfactory foundation for this obligation can be seen as a weakness in his justification of the strong principle of universalizability.

In terms of morality, our practical life is far more complicated than any other aspect of our existence. We may draw the conclusion that there appears to be some inconsistency in our practical lives regarding how to live a moral life due to the complexity of human existence. However, Kant's responsibility ethics and his three categorical imperative principles are extremely important from a pragmatic standpoint in our daily lives and with regard to respect for other members of our community. Thus, we ought to adhere to Kant's three guiding principles to the greatest extent possible.

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