

Kant's Ethical Philosophy and its Powerful Implications



Balabhadra Tripathy

Reader,
Deptt.of English,
Berhampur University,
Berhampur, Odisha

Abstract

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is by universal consent one of the greatest philosophical thinkers of the modern western world. He offers to the society an alternative account of duties and rights, one of the most powerful and influential accounts any philosopher has produced. It does not depend on the idea that our lives and liberties are a gift from God. Instead it depends on the idea that we are rational beings worthy of dignity and respect. Unlike Aristotle, Bentham and Mill, Kant wrote no major work of political theory, only some essays. And yet, the account of morality that emerges from his ethical writings carries powerful implications for today's society. So making sense of Kant is not only a philosophical exercise; it is also a way of examining some of the key assumptions implicit in our public life. Kant rejects utilitarianism. By rejecting rights on a calculation about what will produce the greatest happiness, he argues, utilitarianism leaves rights vulnerable. Just because some action gives many people pleasure does not make it right. Kant argues that morality can't be based on merely empirical considerations such as interests, wants, desires, and preferences people have at any given point of time. These factors could hardly serve for as the basis for universal moral principles. Kant's most fundamental point is that basing moral principles on preferences and desires misplaces what morality is about. The utilitarian's happiness principles destroy the dignity related to morality. This paper is an attempt to study Kant's Philosophy of morality and its universal human values.

Keywords: Implications, Dignity, Utilitarianism, Empirical, Universal, Values.

Introduction

Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals* was published in 1785. It is in fact a preliminary section of his philosophy, directed to the discovery of the supreme principle of morality. The *Critique of Practical Reason* was published in 1788. This is a full-scale examination of the practical activity of reason. Taken together with the *Groundwork*, it represents the most abstract side of Kant's ethics. Kant's *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* was published in 1793. The relevant sections of this contain an account of the evil principle in man and a discussion of the relations between morality, religion and theology. The *Metaphysic of Morals* was published in 1797. This is a systematic working-out in their application to human beings of the rational principles of morality laid down in the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. This paper mainly focuses on Kant's primary ethical principles as laid down in *Groundwork*. In *Groundwork* Kant argues that every person is worthy of respect as a rational being, capable of reason and capable of acting and choosing freely. Kant does not mean that we always succeed in acting rationally. Sometimes we do and sometimes we don't. He means that we have the capacity for reason and for freedom and that capacity is common to human beings as such. When reason governs our will, we are not driven by the desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Our capacity for reason makes us distinctive and sets us apart from mere animal existence. It makes us more than mere creatures of appetite.

Discussion

According to Kant, the moral worth of an action consists not in the consequences that flow from it, but the intention from which the act is done. What matters is the motive. What matters is doing the right thing because it is right not for some ulterior motive. Kant writes, "A good will is not good because of what it affects or accomplishes.... Even if... the power is completely lacking in power to carry out its intentions; if by its utmost effort it still accomplishes nothing... even then it would still shine like a jewel for its own sake as something which has its full value in itself"(Santal 111).

Kant is simply observing that, when we assess the moral worth of an action, we assess the motive from which it is done not the consequences it produces. What matters, Kant tells us, is that the good deed be done because it is the right thing to do- whether or not doing it gives us pleasure. "It is impossible to conceive of anything in the world or out of it which can be considered good without qualification excepting only a good will." This famous and often quoted statement is the first sentence of the first section of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. In this section Kant tries, as did Socrates before him, to elicit the ordinary man's view of morality in preparation for an inquiry into its conditions. The good will is not defined by what it accomplishes, not through its efficiency for attaining any intended end, but only through its willing, that is good in itself.

Immanuel Kant is generally considered as the greatest of modern philosophers. Kant's ethical system as set forth in his *Groundwork of Metaphysic of Moral* has considerable historical importance. As might be expected, Kant will have nothing to do with utilitarianism or with any doctrine which gives morality a purpose outside itself. Kant's ethical philosophy is based upon a series of concepts. First, actions are moral if and only if they are undertaken for the sake of morality alone. Second, the moral quality of an action is judged not according to the action's consequences, but according to the motive that produces it. Third, actions are moral if and only if they are undertaken out of respect for the moral law. Kant's concept of morality is related to his concept of freedom. Freedom is the ability to give your own law to your will. When we follow the demands of some need, desire, or circumstance, our will is determined by something outside ourselves.

Kant offers an account of duties and rights, one of the most powerful and influential accounts any philosopher has produced. It depends on the idea that we are rational beings, worthy of dignity and respect. Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) launched a severe attack on the theory of Utilitarianism. It has its argument that morality is not about maximising happiness. Instead, it is about respecting persons as ends in themselves. Kant's *Groundwork* was published shortly after the American Revolution (1776) and just before the French Revolution (1789). In line with the spirit of these revolutions, it offers a theoretical basis for what the eighteenth century social philosophers called the rights of man, and what we now term as universal human rights. The *Groundwork* tries to answer some basic questions regarding the principle of morality and freedom. Kant's philosophy may look very challenging at first glance. It actually informs much contemporary thinking about morality and politics. So making sense of Kant is not merely a philosophical or academic exercise; it is a way of focussing on some key issues implicit in our public life. Quite rightly Michael J. Sandal points out in his book *Justice*, "Kant's emphasis on human dignity informs present-day notions of universal human rights. More important, his account of freedom figures in many of our contemporary debates about justice" (105).

Kant is a strong critic of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism leaves rights vulnerable as it rests its calculation on production of the greatest happiness. Kant argues that morality cannot be based on merely empirical considerations, such as the interests, wants, desires, and preferences people have at any given time. He says, "The utilitarian's happiness principle contributes nothing whatever toward establishing morality, since making a man happy is quite different from making him good and making him prudent or astute in seeking his advantage quite different from making him virtuous"(Sandal 107). He further comments, basing morality on interests and preferences destroys its dignity.

Kant feels a close relationship between our capacity for reason and our capacity for freedom. When reason governs our will, we are not driven by the desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Our capacity for reason is bound up with our capacity for freedom. Taken together, these capacities make us special, and set us apart from mere beastly existence. They make us more than creatures of appetite. When we, like animals, seek pleasure or avoid pain, we are not really acting freely. We are acting only as the slaves of our appetites and desires. Whenever some behaviour is biologically determined or socially conditioned, it is not truly free. To act freely, according to Kant, is to act autonomously. To Kant the opposite of autonomy is *heteronomy*. When somebody acts heteronomously, he acts according to determinations given outside himself. When we act autonomously, according to a law we give ourselves, we do something for its own sake, as an end in itself. We are no more instruments of purposes given outside us. This action of acting autonomously is what gives human life its special dignity.

Kant's notion of morality is as demanding as his idea of freedom. The moral worth of an action consists not in its consequences, but in the intention with which the act is done. What matters most is the motive. And the motive that confers moral worth on an action is the motive of duty, by which Kant means doing the right thing for the right reason. Kant goes on explaining that if we act out of self-interest, our action lacks moral worth. Our motives of Kant's self-interest like wants, desires, preferences, and appetites are called as 'motives of inclination'. 'Motive of inclination' is contrasted with 'motive of duty' and only actions performed out of the motive of duty have moral worth. While analysing the moral position of Kant Sandal explains, "What matters, Kant tells us, is that the good deed be done because it's the right thing to do- whether or not doing it gives us pleasure"(115). We are not only sentient beings, governed by the pleasure and pain delivered by our senses; we are also rational beings capable of reason. If reason determines our will, then will becomes the power to choose independent of the dictates of nature of inclination. Kant distinguishes two ways that reason can command the will, two different kinds of imperative. They are hypothetical imperative and categorical imperative. Hypothetical imperative is conditional, whereas categorical imperative is unconditional. Kant explains, "If the action would be

good solely as a means to something else, the imperative is hypothetical. If the action is represented as good in itself, and therefore as necessary for a will which of itself accords with reason, then the imperative is categorical" (Kant 414). Only a categorical imperative, Kant argues, can qualify as an imperative of morality. He says, "It is concerned not with the matter of the action and its presumed results, but with its form, and the principle from which it follows. And what is essentially good in the action consists in the mental disposition, let the consequences be what they may" (Kant 416).

It is very important to realise that Kant does not regard himself as making a philosophical discovery of a moral criterion or principle which the ordinary non- philosophical man does not understand. All that Kant claims to be doing at this point is to state a moral principle which is in fact employed by ordinary people in their moral deliberation and thinking and to explain how the validity of the principle follows from philosophical considerations about the nature of reason. The fundamental principle of justice, Kant thinks, can be derived from three simple considerations. First, Justice is concerned with those relationships in which a man can, by his conduct, influence the well-being of another. Secondly, the concept of justice has nothing to do with the relation between the will of one man and the wishes or needs of another, but concerns only a relation between one man's will and the will of another. It concerns, in short, those intentional actions which may affect the power of others to act according to their choice. In this connection John Kemp in his book, *The Philosophy of Kant*, comments, " Justice then, Kant concludes, is the sum total of the conditions under which one person's will can be united with another's under a universal law of freedom" (85). Freedom is thus man's sole innate right, a right which belongs to him solely in virtue of his humanity. Kant says, "Act externally in such a way that the free use of your will is compatible with the freedom of everyone according to a universal law" (Kemp 85). The right to equality is not as some have thought, an independent basic human right, but is derivable from the right to freedom.

A healthy moral standard is essential for the humanity to strive for perfection. The moral standard of an institution will determine its value system and influence its priorities. In the theoretical ethical philosophy of Kant, we have a model for a viable alternative for a human-friendly business ethics. One of the key contributions of Kant's ethics is its presentation of social responsibility evolving from the moral law towards oneself and others. The Kantian argument is that however noble an action may be it should be done out of duty and purely for the sake of duty. This Kantian hypothesis is the cornerstone of

any viable business policy which is objective and humanitarian. The application of reason alone enhances the society in its strive for dutiful action. For Kant, his theory of ethics includes social responsibility and holds it in high esteem which should be carried out in a spirit of duty. Thus every business should treat social responsibility as its priority and it is an obligation. The managers of business organisations have to promote it and for that they need to cultivate it as a personal character in their lives. The business organisation is a moral community. Acting on a universal maxim is the core principle of the moral community. The application of the Kantian categorical imperative fosters fraternity, unanimity and cordiality among all members of the business organisation. The humanity is at risk from the misplaced values of the business practice today. In the theoretical ethical philosophy of Kant we have a model for a viable alternative for a human-friendly business ethics.

Conclusion

One of the key contributions of Kant's ethics is its presentation of social responsibility evolving from the moral law towards oneself and others. Kant designs the social responsibility of every person as a progress towards a moral world. It is in the act of each one fulfilling one's duties in a spirit of reverence for the law we can sufficiently bring to fruition the social responsibility. One may make a distinction between ethics and social responsibility. This distinction does not show these terms as different from each other, rather they are integral to each other. Ethics includes responsibility and responsibility presupposes ethics. Kant's 'universal maxim' theory is essentially meant to promote the social wellbeing of all. More importantly, the mere promotion of general happiness alone does not make a man moral, rather the maxim of one's action should be viable to be universalised leading to the harmony of purposes of the entire human society. The Kantian argument is that however noble an action may be it should be done out of duty and purely for the sake of duty. Kant's code of ethics is inflexible that it permits no exceptions for nourishing one's own egoistic aims and offers no provision for discrimination.

References

1. d'Entreves, A.P. *Natural Law*. Hutchinson University Library. London.1970.
2. Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by H J. Paton. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964.
3. Kemp, John. *The Philosophy of Kant*. Oxford University Press. London.1968.
4. Mackenzie, John S. *A Manual of Ethics*. Oxford University Press. Delhi. 1980.
5. Sandel, Michael J. *Justice*. Penguin Books Ltd. 2010.