

## A CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING OF IMMANUEL KANT'S DEONTOLOGICAL THEORY

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### Abstract

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*According to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), a German philosopher, deontology is an ethical approach centered on rules and professional duties. Deontology derives from the Greek deont, which refers to that which is binding. Kant's deontological philosophy stemmed from his belief that humans possess the ability to reason and understand universal moral laws that they can apply in all situations. Unlike many other ethical theories, deontology does not focus on the consequences of individual actions. Personal emotions behind actions also do not matter within Kantian deontology because Kant believed humans do not always have rational control over their feelings. Instead, the intent behind chosen actions holds far more importance. Therefore, deontology proponents judge actions based on what most people consider to be morally correct, regardless of actual consequences.*

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**Key words:** Duty, Reason, Categorical imperative, good will, Universal law.

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### Introduction

There is an influential ethical approach that is called deontological. The words deontology is derived from the Greek words for duty (deon) and science (or study) of (logos). In contemporary moral philosophy, deontology is one of those kinds of normative theories regarding which choices are morally required, forbidden, or permitted. In other words, deontology falls within the domain of moral theories that guide and assess our choice of what we ought to do (Deontic theories), in contrast to virtue theories. Fundamentally deontological theory is meant to guide and assess what kind of person (in terms of character traits) we are and should be. And within that domain, deontology, those who subscribe to deontological theories of morality stand in opposition to consequential theories. Deontological theories judge the states of affairs those agents. Deontologists of all types hold that some choices cannot be justified by their effects-that no matter how morally good their consequences are some choices are morally forbidden. On deontological accounts of morality, agents cannot make certain wrong choice even if by doing so the number of wrong choices will be minimized. For

deontologists, what makes a choice right is its conformity with moral norms. Such norms are to be simply obeyed by each moral agent; such norm keepings are not to be maximized by each agent. In this sense, for deontologists, the right has priority over the good. If an act is not in accordance with the right, it may not be undertaken, no matter the good that it might produce.

Kant developed the deontological ethical systems that are measured by rightness of the rules rather than the end results. Kant stressed the importance of basic rules or principles that governed the decisions. He believed in good will. The moral person should have good will and that he takes ethical decisions based on what is right. He does not regard the consequences of his decision. The decision maker should discharge his duty. The question arises here what is right? Kant proposed the decision making by universal laws or universal truths which he called categorical imperatives.

### **Concept of 'Duty': -**

Discussion of the people and importance of duty have mostly taken place in the context of a debate between deontological and consequentialist theories of morality that advocate that certain acts can be judged to be right or wrong in themselves. Kant's own view provides an example of such a theory. In contrast, a consequentialist theory holds that the rightness or wrongness of an act is to be judged in terms of the consequences that it produces. An example of a consequentialist theory would be the argument that every action ought to maximize happiness and minimize unhappy states of affairs. John Rawls and Charles argued that the concepts of right and duty ought to be central to any moral theory, while utilitarian such as R.M. Hare and other consequentialists, argued that duties are important only in so far as they indicate those acts which promote good state of affairs. Alasdair McIntyre and Bernard Williams, say that moral philosophy has the right to concern itself more with a description of the conditions of human life and less with traditional concepts of duty and obligation. There is a great insight of Kant regarding morality based on universalisability which says that we should not carve out exceptions for ourselves. What we do should be able to be done by everyone. To understand the concept of universalisability we need to understand that there is a moral law which obliges everyone. Each and every one experiences obligation as per duty. We may have obligation. The only way to explain why humans think that they have to live up to certain obligation is that there is a universal moral law which commands or orders or demands that everyone line up to their duties.

Before we understand the categorical imperative, first of all let me analyse what is imperative in general? We can see Kant's account of imperatives in its proper perspectives only when we have grasped his theory of the subjective and objective principles of practical reason and of their relation to different kinds of goodness. The objective principles of practical reason need not also be subjective principles, that is, they need not be the maxims on which we act. Our practical experience arises from the fact that our inclinations may be 'obstacles and hindrances' to practical reason. The objective principles of practical reason are always principles of some kind of goodness appear to us as principles of obligation, such as, in the form of as commands or imperatives. The objective principles thus appear as commands or imperatives. A command is wholly external, whereas the objective principles of practical reason are manifestations of our own rational nature. Morality can be mere obedience to the commands of the state or even of God. Nevertheless, the affinity between obligation and command is shown by the common tendency to express moral and other obligations using the imperative mood. Kant's definition of an imperative is as follows: "The conception of an objective principle, so far as it is necessitation for a will, is called a command (of reason), and the formula of the command is called an imperative".

### **Categorical Imperative: -**

The categorical imperative or command is the universal moral law, which means that it is categorical, unyielding, and it is demanding. It doesn't allow for excuses and hence it is unconditional. Categorical imperatives must be compared to hypothetical imperative or command. A hypothetical imperative is a conditional imperative. It commands a certain kind of behaviour only if you want to achieve some goal. Example "You can expect a good harvest if you seed the soil properly and timely". But if you don't want a good harvest, then there is no need to seed the soil properly and timely. The hypothesis here is an imperative whose force depends on our having the appropriate desire. This can be seen from the following imaginary dialogue." If you want to run in the London Marathon, you ought to state training. This is hypothetical imperative. "But I don't want to run in the London Marathons." Well in that case, you have no reason to start training". There are two kinds of hypothetical imperatives which Kant calls, technical imperative means the chosen end and the other is assertor imperative means to have same thing. Assertor imperatives appeal to desire that human beings tend naturally to share health and happiness. The assertor imperatives are carrying more general force than hypothetical imperatives do.

In contrast to both kinds of hypothetical imperatives, there are categorical imperatives, for example, “you ought to visit your neighbour in hospital, because you have promised to do so.” The issue involved here is whether you want to visit or not, you ought to keep your promises. This is called categorical imperative statement. As per categorical imperative, Kant thought we have reached the heart of morality. Categorical imperatives transcend our wants and desires by presenting a rational principle of action in the light of which desires themselves are to be assessed. The principles of conduct are overriding, that is, they take precedence over other sorts of consideration when we are deciding what to do. Overriding character of moral considerations is what makes Kant’s conception of categorical imperatives appealing. Kant’s categorical imperatives say that we should always act in such a way that we can turn it into a maxim of our action to become a universal law. Kant’s answer to the question “what makes a moral act right?” “is that an act is morally right if and only if we can will it to become a universal law of conduct. By maxim, Kant means the subjective principle of an action. Morality of any maxim depends on whether we can logically develop it to become a universal law. Kant insists that a moral rule be consistently universalizable. That is saying that moral rules are categorical and not hypothetical. As per categorical imperative argument, example if we don’t want to go to medical school, then the necessity to take biology does not apply to us. In the contrast, Kant’s imperative is categorical it commands unconditionally. That is, it is necessarily binding on everyone, regardless of his or her specific goals or desires, regardless of consequences. A categorical imperative takes the form of “Do this” or “Don’t do that”.<sup>34</sup> Kant’s three significant formulations of the categorical imperatives are:

1. Act only according to that maxim by which you can also will that it would become a universal law.
2. 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 at the same time as an end.
3. Act as though you were, through your maxim, a law-making member of a kingdom of ends.

Immanuel Kant was one of the greatest moral philosophers in all times. Kant’s deontological theory is a profound theory which influences many duty-minded philosophers or professionals. The concept of goodwill is the only thing that is good without qualification. For example, take anything other than a good will that we normally regard as good. We can imagine

that in every case, we are not accompanied by good will. A situation like this will make the world worse rather than better. Therefore, none of these things is good without qualification.

### **Concept of Good Will: -**

Before we try to define some of the important concepts of Kant's, first of all let me try to clear the concept of will and good as per Kant's opinion. As per Kant, 'will' is not the same as merely wishing it or desiring it or having an inclination towards it. To will is to choose or decide upon a course to action. Kant understood that the concept of will is rational for rational thinking. When we choose or decide something, we need to follow certain maxims or principle of action. And it is impossible to will a contradiction or anything that we know to be impossible. A good will is a morally good will, that is, a morally good decision to act on a maxim. Such an act of willing is good. An action is good only if it is done for the sake of doing what one recognizes it to be one's moral duty.

The very idea of goodness of a good will is not derived from the goodness of which it produces. The condition of goodness and its product will not be the sources of unconditional goodness which belongs to a good will alone. A good will continues to have its own unique goodness, even where, by some misfortune, it is unable to produce the results at which it aims. There is nothing in this to suggest that for Kant a good will does not aim at producing results.<sup>36</sup> He holds, on the contrary, that a good will must aim at producing results.

Action that accords with duty are contrary to all our inclination. For example, the person who is suffering from terminal disease still but refrains from committing suicide on principles. The sense of duty presents him to do such act. We mean action not from inclination but from a sense of duty. Many of Kant's critics accuse him of being a moral fanatic because they allege that Kant denies that any action performed on the basis of inclination one has moral worth. If this were so, very few actions indeed would have moral worth.<sup>37</sup> For the genuinely saintly persons; none of their actions would have moral worth. Kant does not have to be so extreme. He can acknowledge the possibility of acting from duty in cases where duty and inclination coincide if we apply the following, counterfactual test. Would the person have done the action that coincides with duty even if he or she had no inclination to perform it? In other words, is the person's sense of moral duty strong enough to lead them to acts he should, regardless of his desires and inclinations.

Kant argues that the highest form of good is good will. To have good will is to perform one's duty. To have good will is to perform which are morally forbidden. Kant said we should

perform our duty because consider it to become duty. Hence, we shall not perform duty for any other reason. To perform an action out of desire for any self-indulgent consequence is not a morally good action. Duty is good in itself.

Kant believed that we should act out of duty and not out of emotion. A human action is not morally good because we feel it's good, or because it is in our own self-interest. Even if duty demanded the same action, but it was done for motives such as compassion, the act would be a good act, but the person would not be moral. Kant said to a system of ethics based on reason and not intuition, a moral person must be a rational being. Being good means having a good will. A good will is when I do my duty for the sake of that duty. I do my duty because it is right, and for no other reason. Kant explained that to act out of duty was doing actions which were morally obligatory and not to person those that are forbidden.

### **Kant's Ethics: -**

Deontological ethical theory concerns with duty. As per the Kant's principle, people behave ethically as they find that it is their solemn duty to do so. The duty of the parents is to protect the life and interests of their children independent of consequences. Parents must take appropriate measures for that. As given in the example, Prince Alex and Daniel Raj are small child under the care of his parents. It is first and foremost duty of his father and mother to see that Prince Alex and Daniel Raj survive. They need to save the life of Prince Alex Daniel Raj from any evil. Their main concern is to save their sons and thus should be their primary duty. They should do it not for any other considerations. Since, the parent's duty is to try to save the life of their minor offspring; they do that without having any expectation or the consequences. This theory is based on the concept of duty. As per Kant, ethics does not depend upon intuition or emotion; rather it depends upon rational basis of the interaction. The concept of "good will" plays a cardinal role in the framework of Kant. People having good will are motivated to do the right thing towards others without expecting any consequences or results. Kant also claims three types of reasons in the light of which a person performs his duty. There are: -

1. A person may do his duty out of self-interest. He does what is right and not because that he enjoys in doing it. He does it because it will get him something that he wants.
2. A person may carry out his duty motivated by direct inclination, that is, by the immediate satisfaction or pleasure it gives him.
3. A person may do something simply because he believes that it is the correct thing to do and, there is, conforms to the moral standards.

We are in the two different worlds which are called the phenomenal and the noumenal world. In phenomenal world what happens is recorded, registered by the human sense of experiences that he accumulates through living the life of human being. The noumenon world is the world of ought and should. The individual enjoys a pure life through giving moral reasons extended to their logical ends. The noble action remains noble or not depending upon the nature and objective behind the action itself. The action ceases to be noble if it is initiated basically to satisfy the selfish interests of the person. If action is initiated from the sense of duty or from a moral will that could be branded by a good will and an action with adequate and proper goodwill make one noble.

The degree of nobility depends upon one's ability to integrate goodwill with experience or a sense of duty. Human being has the capacity to apply moral judgment which segregates segregation the ought to from the ought nots. Based on one's basic sense of duty or the grounding of the moral judgment one does ethical or unethical action. Moral imperatives are the commands of the soul. From the command of the soul, the moral law emerges that extends to the extremes of the moral reasons and establishes or tends to establish a sense of duty. This, obviously, is the sense of action initiated or fostered by the moral principles. Moral principles therefore, are based on universal principle of ought irrespective of any choices. Actions are not judged on the basis of the results but on the basis of their conformity to the standards of duty. Morality is not properly the doctrine of how we may ourselves feel happy but how we may make ourselves worthy of happiness. Kant wants human beings to be placed above the beasts with the emphasis on duty over beauty, morality above happiness. The final target would be to create a moral society or ideal community of rational beings who tend to apply the state of perfection in the state of imperfection. A society fostered by the sense of duty, is what would be the ideal society in ethical terms.

### **Conclusion:**

The divine command theory is actually a cluster of related theories that state that an action is right if God has decreed that it is right. Moral obligations arise from God's commands. The divine command theory is a form of deontology because, according to it, the rightness of any action depends upon that action being performed because it is a duty, not because of any good consequences arising from that action. If God commands people not to work on the Sabbath, because God has commanded that they do not do so. If they do not work on the Sabbath because they are lazy, their action is not, truly speaking right, even though the actual

physical action performed is the same. If God commands that you shall not covet your neighbour's goods, then even if coveting improves people's motivation to achieve things in life, you should not covet your neighbour's goods. Moreover, a world where people coveted their neighbour's goods could not be considered good even if people prefer to live in such a place.

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