

## Immanuel Kant's Duty Ethics

Kant's Duty Ethics theory is a non-consequentialist theory. This means that consequences are not relevant to the determination of the moral worth of actions. This is also a deontological theory that focuses on one's duty. Unlike Mill, Immanuel Kant will not inquire about the results of actions; rather, he would be interested to examine its nature to know if it is imbued with good will. It is good will that gives an action its moral worth. The following lines convey how Kant characterized good will:

There is no possibility of thinking anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a good will (Kant 1785 in Ellington, trans. 1993, 7).

The given description implies that the value of good will is not dependent on what it can or cannot accomplish. It is more than anything that can come out of it in favor of any or all inclinations. Kant stressed that granted that only *good will* remained after trying its best to accomplish something but came out with nothing, it will still continue to shine like a precious gem with its full value. This means that its failure or success in bringing about good results will neither improve nor diminish its worth. That is because it draws its worth from its very own self (Donaldson 1986).

For Kant, "will" is the moral agent's intention or motive. The agent can be said to have good will if the action has the right intention. For Kant, only duty can be considered as the right motive. This means that an action is invested with good will if it is only done from duty and not for other reasons like pleasure, freedom from guilt, and the like. An action imbued with good will is not to be seen as a means to other ends as it is in itself good (Evangelista & Mabaquiao 2020). These notions are highlighted in Kant's distinction between an action done out of duty and an action done in conformity with duty.

A moral agent is said to be **acting out of duty** if she is doing it because she simply recognizes it as her duty to be done. It is performed for its own sake and not for the sake of other ends. It is invested with good will and can thus be said to have moral worth (Evangelista & Mabaquiao 2020). To illustrate, a school worker who diligently accomplishes her tasks and is polite to everyone cannot be said to be acting out of duty if her motivation is her fear of losing her job or her desire to impress her superiors to get the salary raise that she is aspiring for. Her action can only be said to be acted out of duty if she is doing it for the sole reason that it is her duty to do so. In the same token, a mother who kept her promise to bring her son to Disneyland despite feeling sick acted out of duty if it is for the reason that it is her duty to keep her promise and that she recognizes that promise-keeping is the right thing to do. This action is invested with good will and has a moral worth.

On the other hand, a moral agent is said to be **acting in conformity with duty** if her action is governed by her inclinations. She does not see the action as good in itself and only finds it valuable because it is seen as a means to attaining another end. Therefore, this action is devoid of good will and can hence be said to have no moral import

(de Castro, et al. 2003). If for instance, the mother who kept her promise to bring her son to Disneyland only did so because she does not want to feel guilty or she wants to brag about having this trip on her social media accounts, she clearly did it with the wrong motive. She does not see the act of keeping her promise as good in itself or as simply the right thing to do. Rather, it is her means to achieve other ends. In this instance, good will is absent and her action has no moral worth.

From the given examples, we can see that actions cannot immediately be evaluated without the examination of the moral agent's intention or motive. The clear identification of the agent's intent is a precondition to doing an evaluation of the action's moral worth.

But how are one's moral duties determined? To answer this question, Kant distinguished between categorical and hypothetical imperatives. One gets a grasp of what ought to be done from the categorical imperative using reason. Kant believes that through reason, one can arrive at "absolute moral truths" through which one derives moral laws and obligations. These duties are then translated into commands which are referred to as "imperatives" (Evangelista & Mabaquiao, 2020).

A **Hypothetical imperative** is a command hinging on what the individual wants to happen like earning popularity, furthering political ambition, freedom from guilt, fear, anger, wanting to take revenge, and many other personal inclinations (Fernando 2012). This has the form "Do X if you desire Y." A **Categorical imperative**, on the other hand, is not dependent on anybody's desires. This has the form "Do X," which has more force as it tells the individual that it needs to be done under all possible circumstances. This command coming from reason does not only apply to an individual but to all hence, can be considered universal. This is grasped by all moral agents by virtue of being rational. Such command or moral law emanates from within the individual that presents as a moral duty that she is bound to perform absolutely and without conditions. She is not given the option to not do it as it ought to be done in any possible circumstance (Evangelista & Mabaquiao 2020). As categorical imperatives are cleared of inclinations, the act is executed by the moral agent out of respect for the moral law that she herself legislated.

As can be gathered from the discussion, moral obligations (what one ought to do) are from the categorical imperative and not from the hypothetical imperative. What is deemed moral is what is dictated by reason and not by some inclinations of any particular individual. One must never allow one's desires and inclinations to control her; rather, one controls them by allowing herself to be ruled by reason. Meanwhile, Kant has the following formulations of categorical imperative that put emphasis on some important moral insights:

- (1) "Act only on the maxim through which you can and at the same time will that it should become a universal law."
- (2) "Treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end."

- (3) “Therefore, every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxim always a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends.”  
(Fernando 2012, 113-114)

The first formulation, also referred to as “the formula for universal law,” stresses the point that moral agents are bound to follow moral laws that emanated from within her but are nonetheless universal. It highlights the human being’s essence as rational and the characteristic universality of morals. One must only perform actions that are universalizable. The second formulation, which is called “the formula for the end in itself,” gives emphasis on respect for human dignity. Each must be accorded the respect that she deserves as a human person. The third formulation, also known as “the formula for autonomy,” focuses on Kant’s high regard for the individual and her autonomy. In this formulation, he underscored the individual’s capacity for self-governance and self-determination (Fernando 2012).

Although many moral takeaways can be drawn from this theory, Kantian Ethics also has its share of issues. One criticism against it is that it strips the human’s feelings of moral significance. Critics contend that these feelings are neither good nor bad in themselves. Also, its absolutist perspective on moral rules raises the eyebrows of those who embrace the uniqueness of moral situations. Several “what if this is the case” scenarios were hurled against the theory to challenge its absolute stand on moral issues. Some also comment that the principle it presents is simply a formal principle that fails to provide actual moral guidance (Mothershed 1955).