

IMMANUEL KANT IN THE LIGHT OF HIS CONCEPTS OF DUTY, WILL, FREEDOM AND UNIVERSALITY

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“It would not be exaggeration in saying that Kant is the most influential founder of European modernity and the enlightenment rationality. Kant and Kantianism have made great stir; not only in the fields of epistemology, metaphysics, morality and aesthetics, but also in such areas as phenomenology, philosophy of mind and so on.”¹

Anybody who is aware of the content and history of western enlightenment project will not be disagreeing with this observation made by Raghavendra Pratap Singh on Kant and his influence on the domain of thought. The impact of Kant on the course of philosophical thinking after him is of such strength and depth that great speculative systems and ideas were founded on the premises of his thinking. It compelled the later philosophers to either agree or disagree with the Kantian notions.

As opined by James K. Feibleman

“Philosophers today are still inclined to insist that even if you do not agree with Kant you have to answer him, you cannot ignore him or go around him. I am not sure. Still it is important to have read him, provided always that you do not get stuck with his viewpoint, as indeed so many have”².

According to Raghavendra Pratap Singh the philosophical successors influenced by Kant include Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Foucault, Derrida, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and Habermas. Kant’s era is of great importance in the history of philosophy that his name is mentioned along with the founders of western philosophy like Plato and Aristotle. The universal respect that the world of philosophy has conferred on him is to such extent that “for several generations”, comments Bryan Magee, “now the man most widely regarded as the greatest philosopher since the ancient Greeks has been Immanuel Kant”³. Magee describes Kant as “one of the supreme system builders of modern philosophy.”⁴

In his famous essay, “*An Answer to the Question: “What is Enlightenment?”*” (1784), Kant defines enlightenment as the ‘emergence from self-incurred immaturity’. He further describes it as the inability to judge without the guidance of another. By ‘emergence’ Kant intends the emergence of the individual. He denies the guidance of religion and affirms the wide use of reason by the society.

But Kant is critical for the adaptation of his view of enlightenment to Frederick II^s much discussed dictum ‘Argue as much as you like and about whatever you like, but obey!’. Kant took it as a sign of relief that at least some hurdles in the face of use of reason were removed. Referring to this dictum Kant thought that he lived, if not in an ‘enlightened age’, then in an ‘age of enlightenment’.

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Kantian impact becomes a turning point in various domains of philosophical thinking. Especially in epistemology moral law and rationality he brought quite fresh ideas. Many thinkers of the later periods interpreted his views and national and expressed their indebtedness to him. Hegel's criticism of Kant's dialectics and Marx's appreciation of his constitutive activity of human mind belong to the serious reactions to Kant after him.

Kant, through his philosophical thought, tried to answer three important questions which he considered fundamental to life. What *can* I know? What *ought* I to do? and What *may* I hope? And Kant's moral law is his answer to the second question.

To Kant, nothing is absolutely good, except the good will that leads to moral law. Kant states:

“Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good, without qualification, except a Good Will. Intelligence, wit, judgment and the other *talents* of the mind, however they may be name or courage, resolution, perseverance, as qualities of temperament, are undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects; but these gifts of nature may also become bad and mischievous if the will, which is to make use of them, and which, therefore, constitutes what is called character, is not good... The sight of a being who is not adorned with a single feature of a pure and good will, enjoying unbroken prosperity, can never give pleasure to an impartial rational spectator. Thus, a good will appears to constitute the indispensable condition even of being worthy of happiness.”⁵

To Kant, good will is the best of all the good things in the world. It is a jewel that shines in its own light: Even virtue, which is the ultimate end is good will. It is doing one's duty for the sake of duty. Complete good demands joining of happiness with virtue. Others happiness and self-perfection together lead to the moral aim.

One should act as though he could will his action to become universal in nature. That is the moral law. Kant makes moral law compulsory. That is why he names it *Categorical Imperative*. According to him it is the first necessary command of human behavior. Kant writes:

“I assume that there are really exist pure moral laws which entirely *a priori* (without regard to empirical notions, i.e., happiness) determine the acts and omissions i.e., the use of the freedom of any rational being, and that these laws command absolutely (not only hypothetically, on the presupposition of other hypothetically, on the presupposition of other hypothetical ends) and are therefore absolutely necessary”⁶.

Kant means that moral law asks for unconditional obedience. That is the intention behind making it *Categorical Imperative*. Moral law does not originate from experience or any empirical factor. It is free from external ends. Kant rejected entirely the non-ethical theory of morality.

The central theme of Kant's concept of enlightenment is human dignity. In every sphere of his philosophical endeavor, Kant upheld his commitment to the dignity of humans.

Kant wanted to liberate humanity from the tutelage through the enlightenment project. He wrote: “Enlightenment is man’s exodus from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his own understanding without direction from another”⁷.

In the Kantian view human mind occupies an elevated position. This factor also adds to the importance of human angle through which Kant views and analyses philosophical ideas. To him, the laws of things are the laws of mind. It is the human mind that asserts the existence of the things-in-themselves.

Kant, actually, does not try to dismiss our ordinary moral judgments or to present a new morality. Also, he does not attempt to formulate any new principle. But he is setting forth, a new formula which turns to be his major contribution to moral philosophy.

Kant’s moral law is based on imperatives or commands. They ask man to choose a certain course of action and act upon it for the achievement of a definite goal. But the categorical imperative means an unconditional demand and it is compulsory for everybody to obey it.

In the Kantian concept of moral law, awareness and motive are equally important. Awareness of the moral law leads man to the motive for acting in accordance with that law. Moral law demands awareness towards it. The feeling arising from that awareness is called by Kant, respect. Thus, respect to moral law becomes essential for its existence and enactment. Respect to law is the first step to the process of law abiding. Kant’s famous statements regarding the two things that awe him most i.e., the starry sky above him indicate the importance and greatness he attaches to the moral law. There is no doubt that reason and rationality are unavoidable features of every human person, without which the flowering and realization of one’s manliness will be impossible. But at the same time, unlimited freedom for and dependence on reason also will not help dignified development of human personality.

Even thinkers like Hume who recognized the importance of reason and its relevance in human life, did not consider it as the guiding force of morality. When Kant speaks of rationality, he thinks of man completely divorced from all human feelings and emotions. But it is clearly understandable that feelings and emotions have an important role to play in purifying, educating, refining and reforming human persons and fulfilling the necessities of life.

Man’s rational faculty can observe, measure, analyze evaluate and prove. But it is unable to feel and sense. Man’s moral motives and acts have many factors to derive from the sources of feelings and emotions. Man is not a mere bundle of rational calculations. His unique personality is a mixture of rational and emotional factors. Only the philosophical system which blend the two in a balanced and equitable manner can conceive man in his complete and comprehensive totality. Kant’s total reliance on rationality undermines and sometimes ignores the duality and mutuality of these two basic elements of human life.

To thinkers like Hume, the role to be played by reason was that of correcting the feelings. They made it the slave of passions, which helped satisfying one’s desires and

making men capable of achieving their aims. In their system reason is more or less like parasitic on desires and aims for realizing happiness. “But Kant”, observes H.B. Acton,

“considered that the reason functions *both* in the discovering of means for satisfying our desires or for achieving happiness *and* in propounding the moral law and requiring submission to it... In technical and prudential imperatives reason is subordinated to the passions, but in moral context, it is their guide and rightful master.”⁸

Many of the human virtues and moral qualities are derived from man’s emotional and sensitive characteristics factors. Some of them have nothing to do with the rational faculty of human beings. And the capacity of reason to guide them needs scrutiny and verification. Rationality is, as we have mentioned above, calculative in nature. Hence rational guidance may cause to produce negative results in the wellbeing of the human virtues.

Kant never officially recognized human emotions and their place in shaping the life and self of the human individual and society. Iris Murdoch writes:

“He [Kant] did not officially recognize the emotions as part of the structure of morality. When he speaks of love, he tells us to distinguish between practical love which is a matter of rational actions, and pathological love which is a mere matter of feeling. He wants to segregate the messy warm empirical psyche from the clean operations of the reason. However, in a footnote in the *Grundlegung*, he allows a subordinate place to a particular emotion, that of *Achtung*, or respect for the moral law. This emotion is a kind of suffering pride which accompanies, though it does not motivate, the recognition of duty”⁹.

An analysis of these conceptions of Kant draw our attention to certain basic issues related with the humanness of man, his psychological structure, the real source of his virtues etc. It is clear from the writings and the life-history of Immanuel Kant, that he had a kind of ill-feeling towards the feelings- side of human personality. He always considered it as an inferior aspect of man. In his personal affairs too, he did not consider the worth of emotions and emotionally-oriented life. His feeling-free life tempted others to see in him a great thinker and a small person together. Fiebleman observes:

“It is possible to find a great person who is a small thinker- that is fairly common-but it is possible also to find a great thinker who is a small person. Kant belonged to the latter type. He was not the kind of man anyone could love, and evidently nobody tried. He defined marriage as mutual lease of the sexual organs, ignoring all of the emotions and sentiments which play so large a part.”¹⁰.

The chance of these features of Kant’s personal life making its impact on his thought and ideas cannot be denied. It might have played its part in forming his aversion to the emotional factor of human life.

Kant's firm position is that emotions cannot motivate the sense of duty in man. As we have observed earlier, we can see many of the emotional ingredients of man's personality inspire, motivate and even awaken his recognition of duty. The motivation for the performance of duty towards parents and others cannot be described as rational or intellectual. It is purely emotional and it is derived from man's capacity to feel.

CONCEPT OF DUTY

According to Kant, who places every idea on a rational basis, the source of duty is the self-legislation of human reason. The objects of duty are varied. There are duties to God, to human beings and to animals. In the Kantian view, humans are both animal and rational.

Kant has divided duties into different categories: the juridical, ethical, positive, negative, perfect and imperfect. The juridical duties are identified with 'in accordance with' and ethical with 'from duty'. The juridical duties give birth to the legality of the law and the ethical duty to its morality. Positive duties are duties aimed at removal of some suffering or giving any help. Negative duties denote those things which one should not do. Kant describes an imperfect duty as a duty that permits leeway in the interest of inclination. It means that with regard to this duty there is scope for choosing among various possible ways in its performance. But in the case of a perfect duty there is such leeway.

Kantian conception of duty carries the stamp of the influence of the Prussian virtues which were formulated on the basis of the protestant emphasis on intentions rather than the acts, theory of natural rights stressing the 'right reason' and the methods of discipline which were in vogue in the early modern police state. The Prussian element actually weakens the entire concept of duty that Kant puts forward.

CONCEPT OF WILL

In the Kantian System, will is the source of obligation. The will is free and is capable of generating an obligation to the moral law. As the will is in a position to determine the capacity for choice. According to Kant, it is the practical reason itself.

There is a chain of causes behind every event in the world. There is a cause behind every event and there is a cause behind every cause. This chain of causes leads to a first cause. Kant calls that first cause free causality. It is different from causality we experience in the phenomenal world. Kant says that this causality is not lawlessness. There are laws, but they are not self-imposed. At this juncture Kant connects the free will at the center of his idea of ought. Thus, the Kantian dualism of freedom and causality attains particular importance in understanding the possibilities of human will.

God will, according to Kant, is expressed in acting for the sake of duty. It is created at the moment of willing maxim at the moment of willing a maxim that it is good in itself. One's moral responsibility is in his willing alone. It is independent of the results and consequences. The good will is universal and essential and it is performed for its own sake. It is the duty for the duty's sake.

According to Kant moral laws derive from the free will. They are not imposed by God. Acting in accordance with the moral will. They are not imposed by God. Acting in accordance with the moral law means obeying one's own free will. Though Kant holds the view that the assumption of the existence of God is necessary, his conception of moral law is free from God and Faith.

To Kant, the human soul is immortal. Its immortality is linked is immortal. Its immortality is linked with moral laws. In the system of Kant, it is a postulate of the moral law. The personality of the rational being can continue its journey of infinite progress through immortality and attain holy will. That will be possible only by complete adherence to the moral law.

FREEDOM AND AUTONOMY

Although the idea of freedom was prevalent as a serious subject of thinking in the philosophical speculations before Kant and he cannot be credited for invention of autonomy entirely, his role in its development is of immense importance. It is actually Kant who took the lead in revolutionizing the understanding of freedom. He conceived freedom specifically as autonomy.

Kant's formula of autonomy forms an integral part of his moral attitude. The essence of the content of the formula informs us that conscientious agents view every rational agent as legislating moral laws. The factors that formulate a moral attitude is not of any divine or supernatural nature. It is the very expression of the will of man. According to Kant the legislation of moral rules is performed by the will of an authority which is not external. It is the symbolic representation of the acknowledged commitments of the human Individual. That means, to Kant every person is a rational autonomous legislator of moral laws. And freedom, to him is the power of the ever-present action in man, which is expressed in a law-governed way. Kant's conception of the self also relies upon autonomy. The Kantian self is autonomous in every sense. It is the reflection of a self-legislation that is realized on itself and by itself. Kant actually advocates an intelligible freedom firmly founded in the autonomy of will.

Freedom is powerful enough to cross the specified limits. Therefore, it demands restraint with regard to its own inherent anarchic tendencies. The absence of the restraint may cause self-destruction of the very idea of Freedom. To overcome this situation, Kant provides both its positive and negative definitions. He states:

“The will is a kind of causality belonging to living beings in so far as they are rational; freedom would be the property of this causality that makes it effective independent of any determination by alien causes.”¹¹

The idea of freedom consists of two basic factors- freedom *from* and freedom *to*. The former denotes complete independence from any kind of dependency while the latter means the power of a subject to legislate for itself. The Kantian formula considers both the aspects freedom and attempts for a balanced approach. Likewise, the Kantian conception covers both the theoretical and the practical aspects of Freedom.

Kant's concept of freedom has a special link with his part of the enlightenment project. Raghavendra Pratap Singh observes:

“As a matter of fact, Kant's views on freedom are greatly influenced by the enlightenment movement of the time. Kant's concept of reason and human rationality is another attempt to justify the claims of enlightenment.”¹²

The influence of European enlightenment on the thought of Immanuel Kant is reflected in the different domains of his philosophy. Kant viewed enlightenment as the emergence of man from his self-imposed immaturity. He defined immaturity as unwillingness to serve one's own Understanding without direction from another.

Kant calls this immaturity self-imposed because to the thinker of rationality in him, reason languishes not in lack of understanding but in resolve and courage from another. The self-emergence of the individual marked his using of reason and freedom. It also heralded the turning point of liberation of the society from its submission to super-natural guidance of religion. It was expected to submit to its own rationality.

The Kantian view of enlightenment was that the freedom to think, it revealed, tended to create the ability to act freely. This notion of Kant reflected in his famous statement *Sapere aude* (Think boldly, take courage, use your own understanding to serve). And this Kantian declaration turned to be the motto of the enlightenment.

Kant's conception of freedom is still relevant in our age that carries the stamp of the enlightenment in many respects. It helps us to follow certain concepts which continue to be central in the philosophical thinking of our days.

As aptly observed by Raghavendra Pratap Singh,

“Kantian man proceeds on the lines of Copernican hypothesis not only in the field of epistemology but also in that of morality... with Kant's Copernican revolution the questions about the structure of world become the questions of the structure of the transcendental consciousness and the questions of ought pursuits become the questions of freedom of will. Both are activities; the first is connected with knowing, the second with doing.”¹³

Thus, we can see Kant's concept of freedom turns to be a connecting link between the epistemological and the moral spheres of the philosophical thinking. In an age like that of ours, when even after the so called declared claims of Freedom, man is challenged by various kinds of bondages, the intellectual hang-over of the Copernican revolution has particular relevance. It is because of this increasing importance that “Kant's conception of autonomy”, Comments Karl Ameriks,

“has simultaneously become the direct focus of some of the most influential recent work in philosophy. The conception is central to John Rawls, and also by no accident, to Christine Korsgaard, Barbara Herman, Thomas Hill, Onora O'Neill, Thomas Nagel, and Thomas Scanlon, to name just a few major ethicists with broadly similar Kantian views. A range of broadly similar perspectives emphasizing the study

of Kantian autonomy can also be found in the work of figures as diverse as J.B. Schneewind, Harry Frankfurt, and Stephen Darwall, as well as that of top interpreters and foreign scholars such as Henry Allison and Gerold Prauss.”¹⁴

With such tremendous impact that continues till our day, it is clear that the Kantian Freedom-formula is not an outdated notion, but living philosophical reality.

UNIVERSALITY

For Kant, there is no ethics without universality. It is more or less like the foundation of his entire ethical speculations. The philosopher of rationality in Kant, naturally identifies reason as the only basis of Ethics. Along with rationality universality form the key-concepts of Kant’s categorical imperative.

Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) inaugurated a new era in the history of the philosophical thoughts of ethics. It was the era of the universalization test in the moral life of humans. The relevance of Immanuel Kant in the domain of moral philosophy is probably, that he raised the level of the concept of universality from that of an argument to the position of a corrective device for the effective implementation of moral principles in human life. The test of universality provides opportunity for man to think twice before every act. It sometimes opens the door of guilty consciousness that is capable of correcting man and making him good.

Kant’s universalization test reminds us the golden rule taught by almost all the moral systems of the world. Confucius said: “Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself.” A Hindu saying: “Help thy brothers boat across, and lo! thine own has reached the shore.” Buddha stated: “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.” Jesus advised: “Do to others what would have them do to you.” The Prophet taught: “You will not become truthful until you like for others what you like for you.”

All these mottos of morally treating others are echoed in the Kantian principle of moral law which says: “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”¹⁵

For explaining this maxim Kant illustrates the example of promise- breaking. If promise-breaking becomes a universal law, i.e. if everybody starts violating their promises, then the very relevance of promise will be lost and the very idea of promise-keeping will become meaningless. Likewise, Kant cites the case of suicide. If everyone tends to contemplate and commit suicide, no one will be left even to carry on the law that is formulated to prevent it. According to Kant, it is a moral duty to tell the truth and every person is expected to tell the truth in every situation.

We have already discussed about the Kantian concept of good will. To Kant, good will is the ultimate good. It is the expression of the rationality of man. Kant insists that there should not be any kind of violation of the moral law.

According to Kant, reason alone, could enable man to treat others as himself. Only reason can answer the question why be good? To Kant, an inhuman act means treatment

without reasonable and possible justification. It is compulsory that rational action has to be universal. As categorical imperative moral law originates from the rational nature of man.

In the Kantian system, universality is the criterion of moral law. The prescriptive principle or maxim underlying human action has to be examined to decide whether a proposed action is morally right. One has to work out what would happen if that maxim were universally accepted and applied as a moral principle. In other words, if somebody were intending to tell a lie in order to safeguard someone's feelings, then he would need to think about what the implication be if the principle always like to protect someone's feelings were to be universally applicable principle. In the Kantian system of thought, as soon as this maxim was universalized, we would be faced with the absurdity of never being able to trust what people say. Kant, therefore, insists that lying is wrong and one has to act on the basis that it is wrong, regardless of considering our own feelings or those of others.

Ethical values have acquired a very high place in the Kantian system of thought. The spirit of the Kantian ethical principles may be found in the religious texts and the philosophical discourses and speculations before him. But the relevance and greatness of Kant lies in his historical mission for putting those principles in a comprehensive philosophical frame. It can be very well stated that in the entire history of philosophical thinking, no one pursued the rational basis of moral life than Immanuel Kant.

The universal nature of the moral law or the goodness of the good will are not result-oriented. One should act upon moral law for the sake of duty. As categorical imperative, it asks for unconditional obedience universally. In the Kantian world-view, moral actions are free from the results. In the words of Raghavendra Pratap Singh,

“the concept of moral responsibility of the moral actions does not depend on the results of moral actions. In Kant's view moral responsibility lies in the willing alone, because whereas the consequences are dependent upon the laws of nature in the phenomenal world, willing is due to man's free rational nature.”¹⁶

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