UNIT 10: THE ETHICAL THEORY OF KANT

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to

- Explain rationalism in Kant's ethical theory,
- Define Categorical Imperative,
- Discuss Duty for duty's sake…the rule of life,
- Explain Kant's rejection of Teleological ethics,
- Elaborate Maxims of morality,
- Describe critically Kant's Ethical Theory.

10.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces to you Kant's Ethical Theory. Kantian Ethical Theory refers to a deontological ethical theory ascribed to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. According to Kant, actions become good or bad by rule following, not by virtue of their consequences. Kant advocates that reason alone can judge all our actions as right or wrong. His moral theory called "Rationalism" which gives all importance to reason. According to Kant, reason should be the regulator of our moral conduct. The form of reason which is responsible for building up the conception of the world out of the materials supplied by the senses is called pure reason. The form of

reason which is responsible for regulating our moral conduct is called by Kant "practical reason". Kant's moral theory has no place for emotion. Hence it is regarded to be ascetic in character. Emotion has no place or role to play in an individual's life to judge one's action as right or wrong. In Rationalism, virtue is the highest good or the Sumum bonum. One must conquer feelings and desires in order to achieve virtue or the highest good. Rationalism rejects sensibility and considers that we can attain virtue in our life only when we absolutely depend on reason

Kant never accepts the theory that God judges all our actions and accordingly we either go to heaven or hell. He therefore rejects all Teleological grounds to judge our actions as right or wrong. Kant's, Rationalism as a Moral theory is also known as Rigorism, Purism or Formal Ethics. It gives us the pure form of morality-the Categorical Imperative, but does not recognize the importance of the matter or content of morality which is supplied by feelings and desire. Kant's point of view is deontological, which regards duty as the fundamental concept of ethics. It is not teleological, which regards end or purpose as the fundamental concept of ethics. Rightness and obligation are the central concepts of ethics. Kant assumes that Duty and Self-interest are the only two motives of actions. Kant, for the first time, makes deontological concepts central in ethics in an emphatic way. Paton says, ''Kant knew, of course, that he was trying to do something which no one had succeeded in doing before- namely, to set forth the principles of morality apart from all considerations of self interest".



LET US KNOW

Bradley observes that Hedonism is the doctrine of 'pleasure for pleasure's sake' and Rationalism is the doctrine of 'duty for duty's sake'.

10.3 RATIONALISM IN KANT'S ETHICAL THEORY

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) propounds the view that Reason is the ground of Morality. Reason can determine the nature of our actions. Reason differentiates man from all lower animals. It is the characteristics of element in human nature. Rationalism emphasises the claim of reason. Rationalism as a moral theory shows that our senses supply the materials of our knowledge and reason plays an important role in constituting the world of ideas and conceptions. Rationalism advocates self denial and self conquest. Rationalism seeks to spiritualize the nature of man. The fulfilment of the higher self or pure reason is the ideal of Rationalism.

Rationalism is not an explicit theory of the end or ideal. It is a vindication of the absoluteness of the moral law or the Categorical Imperative of the practical reason. It is only the reason which can supply us the moral law. Reason regulates our moral conduct. There are some merits of Rationalism. They are as follows:

(1) Rationalism rightly holds that moral distinctions are objective, and not merely subjective and dependent upon more personal feelings, emotions and sentiments.

(2) Rationalism emphasizes an important truth that the reason is the regulative principle in the life of a person. But it errs in holding that the life of the man must be a life of pure reason devoid of sensibility. Sensibility constitutes the matter of moral life. Reason gives the form of moral law. It regulates sensibility according to the moral law.

(3) Rationalism emphasizes the notion of duty or moral obligation. It asserts the distinction between ought and the 'is'. It asserts that the ethical end is, in its very nature, an idea demanding realization. But it gives us only the form of the moral ideal. The content comes from sensibility. Kant does not give any place to sensibility in moral life.

(4) Rationalism emphasizes the dignity and independence of man as a

rational being.

(5) Kant recognizes Right as distinct from expediency. Right, in Kant's theory, stands out clear from the taint of all prudential considerations.

(6) Rationalism is undoubtedly true in holding that self-sacrifice is a condition of self-realization.

Kant's Rationalism is akin to Philosophical Intuitionism. According to Kant, Moral law is known intuitively. Intuition is the ability to something by using our feelings rather than through the facts. Kant regards conscience as practical reason. It imposes the Moral law upon itself. The nature of moral law is a-priori and not empirical. It is self evident. Actions are good or bad from their agreement or disagreement with the Moral law. In Kant's Moral theory, intuition plays an important factor in determined the purity of motive of our action. The moral quality of an action is not determined by any end or its consequences. Intuitionism does not give any philosophical justification of the moral principles. But Kant tries to give a philosophical foundation of the Moral Law. Kant's philosophy of intuitionism has also influenced his Moral Theory of Rationalism. Therefore, it is also known as Rational Intuitionism. It regards the Moral Law or the internal law of conscience as the moral standard. Kant is an advocate of moral ethics as distinguished from teleological ethics. Conscience is moral or practical reason.

10.4 KANT'S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Kant advocates the nature of moral law as '' Categorical Imperative'' which is intuited by reason. His Rationalism or Formal Ethics is Categorical in nature. According to Kant, the internal law of conscience or practical reason is the ultimate moral standard. The practical reason is unconditional.

The moral law is Categorical imperative. It is a command and in that sense it is an imperative. It is not an assertion of fact. It is subject to no qualification. Therefore, it is an imperative. (Without understanding the

Kantian conception of categorical imperative we cannot apprehend his moral philosophy.) Moral Law is not dependent upon any condition and thereby it is regarded to be categorical. It has to be obeyed not because it helps us to attain this or that end, in life, but because it is absolute and unconditionally binding upon us or rather it has to be obeyed without any purpose.

Moral Law is thus Categorical Imperative or unconditional and is independent of nature. Moral Law is not assertorial, but imperative. Moral Law never asserts our action as right or wrong. It is a-priori and it is not derived from any experience because it depends upon on our intuition i.e. our reason. According to Kant, reason has the supreme place in human constitution. Practical reason gives us the moral law which is of the nature of Categorical imperative. This moral law is absolutely binding on us. Moral law is free from empirical factors, and ought to be done under all circumstances, it is known in advance of a particular situation. Thus, according to Kant, Moral law cannot be hypothetical imperative. A Categorical imperative is different from hypothetical imperative. A hypothetical imperative is not absolutely binding on us. The following is an example of a hypothetical imperative-"If you want to understand the philosophy of Aristotle then you must have some understanding of the philosophy of Plato." It is not absolutely and unconditionally necessary for someone who understands the philosophy of Aristotle. The command or the imperative is subject to a qualification here. But moral law is not subject to any qualification. The moral law is thus categorical.

Every external end is Empirical, it is an object of experience. It can give rise only to a hypothetical imperative - "'If I wish to attain such and such an end, then I am to act in such and such a way." But a Categorical imperative or the moral law has no reference o any external ends. Moral law is referred to the right direction of the will itself. The Categorical imperative is the Universal Moral Law, it applies to all persons; it is common to mankind.

Moral Law demands unconditional obedience. We ought to obey Moral law because it is imposed by our practical reason. We ought to obey

it not for the sake of any other end. Moral Law is not a means to a higher end; it is an end in itself. It is no absolute unconditional command which admits of no question. What we ought to do we ought to do. It cannot set aside by any higher law.

Do you how Kant has judged our actions as right or wrong? According to Kant, actions are right only when they are done for the sake of duty. Any action is wrong when it is does not follow the conditions of duty. An action is right only when it is performed for the sake of its rightness. Therefore, Kant sets before us a maxim to judge our action as right or wrong. The maxim is ''Duty for duties sake''. It is the true rule of life. Duty has to be performed under all conditions. It has to be performed whatever may happen. A moral life is an autonomous life. Moral directives are directives issued by practical reason. The aim of life is virtue and not pleasure. According to Kant, good will is the only jewel which shines in its own light. Practical life itself enforces moral laws upon itself. Kant holds that it is not moral to help another if one is pained by his sorrow and the help is consequent upon this feeling. The value of actions depends upon their reason, not result. In acting there can be only one motivating cause and that is a faith in moral law. Sublime qualities like love, sympathy etc; should be adhered to only as a duty, not due to attachment. There is obligation in duty. Its directive is the ultimate directive. It does not depend upon the desire or aversion of the individual.

When Kant advocates that moral law is a categorical imperative then thereby he meant that the moral law is independent of desire. Desire may be present in following the moral law. But there may not be a desire to fulfil the moral law. Obedience to the moral law may be the most painful alternative. But still the moral law is recognised as having a binding force upon our will. Kant says that an act to be virtuous must exclude the influence of desire. It must be the outcome of a pure regards for the moral law. Kant writes, '' Nothing can possible be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification except a good will.'' For example, Kant will condemn an act of an individual who takes care of a

poor person out of pure love. To him such law is only pathological. He respects such an act when it is done of pure regards for the moral law.

Kant at one place writes that there is nothing in the world or even out of it that can be called good except the Good will. A Good will is that will which is motivated by pure respect for the moral law. Kant holds that the Good will is the only good. Good will is unconditional and necessarily independent of other conditions. The Good will is the only absolutely good. Therefore, the Good will is never affected by any desire or feeling for any result. We can say here that in Kant's categorical imperative a moral action is determined by our motive. An action is moral if its motive is moral, if it is promoted by a consciousness of duty.

Categorical imperative is possible because man is a rational being. Reason is the universal element in human nature. It imposes the categorical imperative upon itself. The will which ought to be guided by its own moral law i.e. the categorical imperative, the will which is autonomous, unconditional therefore has to be governed by itself.

Kant makes a distinction between heteronomy and the autonomy of the will. According to Kant, the will is autonomous or free, when it is a law unto itself - when it acts solely from a sense of duty. The will is heteronomous when it is guided by some end or motive by desire. Good will is autonomous. Good will is intrinsically and unconditionally good. Kant was influenced by Butler in formulating his concept of autonomy of the will. Butler recognised the autonomy of conscience and 'man as a law to himself '.

Virtue depends or lies in the cultivation of good will or rational will or holy will. The moral life is life of pure reason. In pure reason feelings and emotions have no place in it. Feelings and emotions ought to be completely suppressed. Even to give way to love or compassion is immoral. Life is pure reason undisturbed by feeling and emotion is the ideal of moral life. Kant allows only the feelings of reverence for the moral law in moral life.

Kant would condemn the act of a person who out of love or compassion, nurses a sick man or helps a poor man. Such an act would be called pathological or abnormal. Kant advocates two conditions for considering an action as right action. These two conditions are - (1) it should conform to the moral law revealed by reason, (2) the agent should perform it out pure regard for the moral law.

Do you know why Kant rejects Teleological Ethics? Kant's ethical system is notable form of deontological ethics. According to Kant, an action is right because it conforms to the formal principles of the good will. In contrast, in Teleological ethics there is no such emphasis on formal principle. In Teleological ethics morality of an action is judged by God. Teleological ethics accepts that an action is good when it satisfies certain desires. In Kant's opinion, in such moral philosophy, moral law cannot become a universal law. Here, good depends upon particular desire of an individual. This is the reason why Kant rejects all Teleological ethics.

The Categorical Imperative is a pure form devoid of content. The moral law is a pure form without any matter. It has no particular content. Anything which is pure in nature is simple and unique and without any content. Moral law being pure and simple in nature cannot tell us the content of our action. Moral law cannot tell us what we should do or what we should not do, because all particular things have in them an empirical and contingent element and because moral law can have no reference to any such element. The moral law cannot tell us that they should conform to a form. It is form of law in general. It only tells us that our actions should have self - consistency.



LET US KNOW

Kant writes, '' Nothing can be possible conceived in the world , or even out of it , which can be called good without qualification except a good will.'' A Good will is that will which is motivated by pure respect for the moral law. The Good will is the only absolutely good. A will is

good, not because of its effects, but in itself and for itself.

According to Kant, moral law cannot be hypothetical. A Categorical Imperative is different from hypothetical imperative. A hypothetical imperative is not absolutely binding on us.

Kant states that actions are right only when they are done for the sake of duty. Kant sets before us a maxim to judge our action as right or wrong. The maxim is " Duty for duties sake ". It is the true rule of life. According to Kant, "the will is autonomous or free, when it is a law unto itself - when it acts solely from a sense of duty. The will is heteronomous when it is guided by some end or moved by desire."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: What is the other name of Kant's moral theory?

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Q2: Why Kant's philosophy is known as rational intuitionism?

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Q3: Why moral law is considered categorical imperative, according to Kant?

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Q4: What is Good will?

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Q5: What do you mean by autonomous of will and heteronomous of will?

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Q6: " Duty for duties sake " discuss this statement.

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Q7: What are the two conditions advocated by Kant for considering an action as right, according to Kant.

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10.5 MAXIMS OF MORALITY

Maxims helps make the moral law more certain and definite. The maxim which Kant has provided to make the moral law more certain is simple and self - consistent. This follows that self-consistency must be present in our actions. Maxims can be applied only when there are certain given pre-supposed content. In Kant's categorical imperative the maxims depend on the existence of right and duties. But in the opinion of Prof. Mackenzie the maxims of Kant's categorical imperative has form without matter. He writes on " Manual of ethics ", " Kant's principle of self-consistency gives us form without matter - the mere form of reason with all the particular content of the desires left out ".

Kant tries to make the moral law or categorical imperative more definite by laying down the following maxims -

(1) " Act only on that maxim which thou canst will to be universal law."

This maxim shows that what is right is universal, and what is expedient is not universal. Kant illustrates the maxim by the example of breaking promises. If the law of promise-breaking becomes universal or in other words everyone starts violating promise, then promise would no longer retain any meaning. In the same way, a person in an extreme state of depression can contemplate suicide but this is wrong, not being a universal law and incapable of becoming one. If suicides were committed by all persons, there would soon be no person left to commit suicide " Act in such a way as you could will that everyone else should act under the same general conditions. " This is the first maxims of morality.

Kant's first moral maxim can be criticised in the following ways:-

1. Kant wanted to give moral law a concrete form with this principle but it failed to perform this task.

2. This law does not grant licence for any exceptions and therefore becomes rigorous.

3. The speciality of this maxim is that it stresses the social aspect of Ethics but being Formal, it becomes impractical.

(2) Kant's second maxim is - "So act as to treat humanity whether in thine own person or in that of any other, always as an end, and never as a means. "

The maxim orders us to treat personality as of absolute worth. A person is an end in himself; and note means. Man is essentially rational. Only rational nature is such an end, and has absolute worth. Man is a creature of sensibility has no absolute worth. The rational nature which constitutes humanity should be respected. No man has the right to allow others to exploit him. Deception is wrong because the deceiver misleads others and exploits them as a means to his own ends. We should respect our own personality and the personality of others. This maxim does not allow any one the privilege or right to committing suicide. Suicide is wrong because the person who commits it does not give due respect to his intrinsic humanity and treat himself merely as a means to enjoyment of pleasure.

Thus, from the above law, Kant derives a corollary - " Try always to perfect thy itself, and try to conduce to the happiness of others, by bringing about favourable circumstances, as you cannot make other perfect." For the attainment of perfection, will power and control are needed and no one can control another. Consequently he cannot make them perfect.

Kant's second maxim is also criticised. Kant's moral maxim is important because it preaches respect for our own and others' personalities. Everyone will agree with the fact that it is immoral to reduce any one's personality to the level of a means to one's end but notwithstanding this, some exceptions will have to be admitted.

(3) Kant's third moral maxim is - "Act as a member of a kingdom of ends."

It means - " So act as to behave in understanding that you and everyone else are of intrinsic value : behave as befits member of a society

in which everyone looks upon the good of another as having a value equal to his own, and everyone behaves unto him as he does unto them, in which there are every means and ends in which everyone attains his own good and increases the good of others," In this way Kant imagines a " Kingdom of ends " which is an ideal state in which all members obey the moral law. Each member of that stat is autonomously controlled and applies the law upon himself, which law is his internal rational law. Rational law is universal. Thus, people who follow it are in a state of complete mutual harmony. Moral Laws are neither external laws nor supernatural orders. In a perfect society peoples are self- imposed and obedience to them does not depend upon any external pressure. In this way, in a perfect society, everyone will be free, rational and happy.

In this way, Kant treats the adjustment of virtue and happiness as essential. If it is not indeed to make morality an object of mere faith and if it also has some intrinsic value then the existence of a kingdom, in which virtue and happiness are in harmony, will have to be imagined. Only then moral laws be true inspires of actions. The aim of moral good is the ultimate good. Moral good is just doing duty for the sake of duty. In ultimate good includes both virtue and happiness.

Kant's third moral maxim is open to criticism in the following way:-

(1) Kant's moral principle is based on a psychological dualism in reason and sensibility. He treats the two as mutually contradictory, forgetting, mean while, their inseparable nature as parts of the soul. Sensibility is the subject matter of moral life. It needs the form of intellect. It is not essential that it contradicts reason.

(2) Thus, lacking sensibility Kant's moral dictum are mere forms.

(3) Kant's pure moralism is partial. It terms the moral value as a perfect state. But to fulfil one's duty completely oblivious of the result may not only asceticism but even incorrect.

10.6 CRITICISM

Kant's Categorical imperative has been severely criticised for the psychological dualism of reason and sensibility. Kant's total rejection of human desires in following a life of moral conduct is not accepted by the critics. It is true that pure reason helps in leading a virtuous life but we cannot overlook the point that sensibility regulates our moral actions. There are several points of observations on Kant's Categorical imperative by the critics. They are as follows:

(1) Kant's Categorical Imperative is based on psychological dualism. This psychological dualism is between reason and sensibility. Our mind is an organic unity of both feeling and desires. An individual self is controlled by both feeling and desires. Feeling and desires are interrelated. Feeling gives the matter of desire; desire gives the rise to activity. There is n action without sensibility. But Kant over look this organic unit of the mind. For him, it is only pure reason which activates our voluntary actions in a rational self.

(2) Kant advocates an ascetic view of morality. According to Kant, sensibility is irrational. But for the critics this is an important mistake that Kant commits, while advocating this theory of an independent rational mind he holds the view that morality consists in sacrificing all human desires. A virtuous man should be guided by reason alone. But in our ordinary life this is not possible. Human beings have both sensibility and rationality. Kant here fails to consider the fact that virtue is the harmony between sensibility and rationality. Moreover, Kant overlooks the fact that moral conduct is impossible without desires and impulses.

(3) Kant has condemned sensibility. So the critics observe that Kant's Rationalism is ascetic and rigoristic in nature. Kant advocates that we have to extinguish all our desires, affection, love and care. But it is a fact that an individual cannot survive without these values and feelings. Moreover, these values are part and parcel of human existence and

always permissible within its limited sphere. It becomes all black when man becomes egoist and fails to understand its real value and thus its application.

(4) According to Kant our conduct cannot be good or virtuous when it is controlled by feelings. In Kant's Moral philosophy all our acts of love and care are artificial because it is mixed with sensibility and desire. Bur this is not the case. Any virtuous act is performed with respect for the Moral law. Virtue is an inward expression of our consciousness which is pure in nature.

(5) Kant holds that moral law cannot be explained. Moral law is the ultimate good. So it is Categorical Imperative. But Kant fails to give an adequate explanation regarding the categorical nature of the Moral law.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q8: Fill in the blanks

a) Kant's rationalism is based on…….

b) Moral Law of Kant is ……and not…….

c) Moral Law is……

d) The maxim of Kant is……

e) Kant's maxim depends upon on the existence of concrete…..and……

Q9: State whether the following statements are true or false

a) Rationalism of Kant's Ethical Theory ignores claim of sensibility. (T/F)

b) Kant's Rationalism is also akin to Philosophical Intuitionism. (T/)

c) Kant has accepted Teleological ethics. (T/F)

Q10: State one of the maxims given by Kant in his moral philosophy to make the categorical imperative more definite.

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10.7 LETS US SUM UP

- Kant considers conscience as practical reason.
- Kant's Rationalism is a form of Philosophical Intuitionism.
- Kant's Rationalism or Formal Ethics is Categorical in nature.
- Moral law is unconditional, independent of nature and therefore a-priori.
- Categorical imperative and hypothetical imperative is different.
- Categorical imperative is the universal moral law.
- Duty for duty's sake is the true rule of life.
- Kant rejects Teleological ethics.
- In Kant's Moral Theory, intuition plays an important factor in determining the purity of motive of our action
- Kant makes a distinction between the autonomy of will and the heteronomy of the will.
- A virtuous action must be always free from any desire.
- Kant propounds that Good will is the only will which follows "Categorical Imperative".
- Good will is unconditional and necessarily independent of other conditions.
- Kant advocates two conditions for considering an action as right action.



10.8 FURTHER READING

1) Sinha, Jadunath. 1973. A MANUAL OF ETHICS. New central book, Agency, Calcutta 9.
2) Ram Nath Sharma . HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY.

3) William K. Frankena.1973. Ethics. Prentice-Hall,1973.

4) Lilly, William.1964. Introduction to Ethics. Methuen.

10.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGREES

Ans to Q1: Rigorism or purism or formal ethics.

Ans. To Q. no.2: Intuition plays an important role in determining the purity of our action in Kant's moral theory. His philosophy of intuitionism has influenced moral theory of rationalism to a great extent. That is why his moral theory is known as rational intuitionism.

Ans. To Q. no.7: (1) It should conform to the moral law revealed by reason. (2) the agent should perform it out of pure regard for the moral law.

Ans. To Q. no 8: a) Reason

b) Categorical imperative and hypothetical imperative

c) Categorical imperative

d) Duty for duty's sake

e) Right and duties

Ans. To Q. no.9: a) yes, b) yes, c) no.

Ans. To Q. no.10: "Act only on that maxim which thou canst will to be a universal law".

10.10: MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Very short Questions

Q1: Who views that reason is the ground of morality?

Q2: How moral law is known to us?

Q3: What are the two conditions advocated by Kant for considering an action as right action?

Q4: What do you mean by autonomy of will?

B. Short Questions (Write in about 100-150 words)

Q1: Briefly points out some critical remarks on Kant's moral law.

Q2: Does the autonomy of will differ from heteronomy of will? Discuss briefly.

Q3: What do you mean by Duty for duty's sake? Briefly discuss.

Q4: What are the three maxims provided by Kant to make moral law more definite?

Q5: Briefly comment on the rejection of Teleological Ethics by Kant.

C. Long Questions (Write in about 300-500 words)

Q1: Is Kant's theory of Categorical imperative rigid in nature? Discuss.

Q2: How does Kant explain the universal nature of categorical imperative. Discuss

Q3: Explain the maxims of Categorical imperative.

Q4: Why Kant's theory is called rigoristic in nature?

Q5: Does Kant accept Teleological Ethics?

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