UNIT-11: KANT AND AUTONOMY OF THE WILL

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning objectives
11.2 Introduction
11.3 Categorical and hypothetical imperative
11.4 Maxims of Categorical Imperative
11.5 Good Will and Autonomy of the will
11.6 Criticism
11.7 Let us Sum-Up
11.8 Further Readings
11.9 Answers to Check Your Progress
11.10 Model Questions

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to

- know what is the autonomy of the will,
- distinguish between categorical and hypothetical imperative,
- explain the maxims of the categorical imperative,
- know the relation between good will and the autonomy of the will,
- describe the nature of autonomous and heteronomous will,
- Critically analyse Kant's autonomy of the will.

11.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces to you Kant's autonomy of the will in his moral theory. All men have a direct and distinct consciousness of freedom. They feel that they are able to choose between alternative forces of actions. Man has autonomy to choose what is right and wrong. After an act they also feel that they could have chosen otherwise. This is a fact of experience and so must be recognized.

The sense of personal responsibility that we are responsible for what we do would be meaningless if the power of choice is denied. This is the autonomy of the will. Like ourselves we hold others also responsible for

their choices and actions. Praise and blame, approval and disapproval and punishments and the norms and standards in society assume human freedom.

Man is not a passive product of the forces acting on it from without but an active rational principle which can resist "external forces" and so all its actions. This self determinism recognizes freedom of will and makes clear the real or true meaning of freedom which is essential for morality.



LET US KNOW

In Kant's moral philosophy it is found that moral life begins with self-restraint and self-denial, and this negative element will never totally disappear. But it only a means to self-realization which consists in transforming the lower life of sensibility into the higher life of reason- in harmonizing the sentient self with the rational self.

11.3 CATEGORICAL AND HYPOTHETICAL IMPERATIVE

Before going to discuss about Kant's autonomy of the will we must discuss about the Categorical Imperative.

Although everything naturally acts in accordance with law, Kant supposed that only rational beings do so consciously, in obedience to the objective principles determined by practical reason. Human agents also have subjective impulses-desires and inclinations that may contradict the dictates of reason. So there is the claim of reason as an "obligation', a command that we act in a particular way, or in imperative. Such imperatives may occur in either of two distinct forms.

1. **Hypothetical and 2. Categorical imperative.**

A. hypothetical imperative:

It conditionally demands performance of an action for the sake of some other end or purpose; it has the form "Do A in order to achieve X." The application of hypothetical imperatives to ethical decision is somehow

problematic. In such cases it is clear that we are morally obliged to perform the action 'A' only if we are sure both that X is a legitimate goal and that doing 'A' will in fact produce this desirable result. For a perfectly rational being, all of this would be analytic, but given the general limitation of human knowledge, the joint conditions may rarely be satisfied.

B. Categorical Imperative:

Autonomy of will is related to the universal law which is categorical imperative. Categorical Imperative is the internal law of conscience or practical reason. It is an "imperative" or command as opposed to an assertion of fact. A natural law is assertorial. Matter attracts matter. It is an assertion of facts. A psychological law also is assertorial. But the Moral Law is not assertorial, but imperative. It is 'categorical' or unconditional. According to Kant, the ultimate principle of morality must be a moral law which is capable of guiding us to the right action in application to every possible set of circumstances.

A categorical imperative unconditionally demands performance of an action for its own sake; it has the form "Do A." An absolute moral demand of this sort gives rise to same difficulties like hypothetical imperative since it expresses moral obligation with the perfect necessity that would directly bind any will uncluttered by subjective inclinations, the categorical imperative must be known 'a- priori"; yet it cannot be an analytic judgment since its content is not contained in the concept of a rational agent as such. The supreme principle of morality must be a synthetic a- priori proposition.

The categorical imperative or the moral law has no reference to any external ends, but simply to the right direction of the will itself. It is the universal moral law; it applies to all persons and common to all human beings. The moral law cannot tell us about the matter or content of our actions. It simply tells us that our actions should have self-consistency.

11.4 MAXIMS OF CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

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

1. **"Act only on that maxim which thou canst will to be a universal law."** This maxim shows that what is right is universal, and that what is expedient is not universal. Kant illustrates the maxim by the example of breaking promises. It is wrong to break a promise, because this act cannot be universalized. The maxim makes it clear that it is wrong, because it cannot be a universal law. "Act in such a way as you could will that everyone else should act under the same general conditions." This is the first maxim of morality.
2. **"So act as to treat humanity whether in thine own person or in that of any other, always as an end never as a means only"**

   A person is an end in himself, and not means. Man is essentially rational. Only rational nature is such an end, and has absolute worth. The rational nature which constitutes humanity should be respected. No one should use himself as a means to anybody else, or use any other person as a means to him. We should respect our own personality and that of others. This is the second maxim of morality.
3. **"Act as a member of a kingdom of ends."**

   This is the third maxim Treat yourself and every other human being as of equal intrinsic value; behave as a member of an ideal republic in which each citizen is a sovereign and a subject in which each is a means and end. A "kingdom of ends" is an ideal society of rational person following the Moral Law. Each member is a sovereign, because he imposes the Moral Law upon himself, and each member is a subject because he obeys the Moral Law imposed by himself. All persons following the Moral Law live in perfect harmony with one another. A "kingdom of ends" would be an ideal society in which every person would act in a rational way and follow the categorical imperative and thus live in perfect harmony with everybody.



LET US KNOW

Kant denies that human self is not only the empirical self (a series of mental states) which is subject to necessity, determination or casual law.

11.5 GOOD WILL AND AUTONOMY OF THE WILL

According to Kant the most basic aim of moral philosophy, and so also of the Groundwork, is, to "seek out" the foundational principle of a "metaphysics of morals," which Kant understands as a system of a priori moral principles that apply the Categorical Imperative to human persons in all times and cultures. Kant pursues this project through the first two chapters of the Groundwork. He proceeds by analyzing and elucidating commonsense ideas about morality, including the ideas of a "good will" and "duty". The point of this first project is to come up with a precise statement of the principle or principles on which all of our ordinary moral judgments are based.

In the third and final chapter of the Groundwork, Kant takes up his second fundamental aim, to "establish" this foundational moral principle as a demand of each person's own rational will, his conclusion apparently tries to answering those who want a proof that we really are bound by moral requirements. He rests this second project on the position that we - or at least creatures with rational wills - possess autonomy. The argument of this second project does often appear to try to reach out to a metaphysical fact about our wills. This has led some readers to the conclusion that he is, after all, trying to justify moral requirements by appealing to a fact - our autonomy - that even a moral skeptic would have to recognize.

Autonomy is an individual's capacity for self-determination or self-governance. Moral autonomy is the capacity to deliberate and to give oneself the moral law.

Kant is a deontologist. Deontologists believe that morality is a matter of duty. We have moral duties to do things which are right to do and moral

duties not to do things which it is wrong to do. Whether something is right or wrong doesn't depend on its consequences. Rather an action is right or wrong in itself.

Deontology says that certain types of action are right or wrong. How do we distinguish types of actions? Actions are the result of choices, and so should be understood in terms of choices. Choices are made for reasons, and with a purpose in mind. These considerations determine what the action performed actually is. So, deontology argues that we do not know whether an action is right or wrong unless we know the intention. We should judge whether an action is right or wrong by the agent's intention.

Kant believed that, whenever we make a decisions, we act on a maxim. Maxims are Kant's version of intentions. They are the personal principles that guide our decisions.

Autonomy is central in certain moral frameworks. For Kant, the self imposition of universal moral law (autonomy of will) is the ground to choose of both moral obligation and the respect which others owe to us and we owe ourselves. Our ability to use reasons for our actions presupposes that we understand ourselves as free.

Freedom of will is the fundamental postulate or necessary condition of morality. Free will is implied by morality. If the will is not free, morality becomes impossible. The denial of freedom of the will gradually weakens the very foundation of morality. Freedom is presupposed by moral obligation. Kant reconciled freedom and necessity in this way.

For Kant, an action is moral if its motive is moral, if it is prompted by a conscious duty. Because wealth and talents are not unconditionally good. They can be abused by a bad will. They are good only when they are used by a good will. But a good will is an unconditional good, which is independent of other conditions. It is the good direction of the will, but not towards any particular good, - knowledge, beauty or happiness. It is the will that follows the categorical imperative. It should be promoted by pure respect for the Moral Law. Reason is the universal element in human nature. It imposes the categorical imperative upon itself.

The will ought to be guided by its own moral law or categorical imperative. According to Kant, the will is autonomous or free, when it is a law unto itself. It is entirely self-legislating. It is perfectly bound by the moral obligation. These moral obligations are those which it has imposed upon itself and these moral obligations are universally imposed on everyone else by virtue of their common possession of the same rational faculties. All genuinely moral action, Kant supposed, flows from an autonomous will. So even the possibility of morality presupposes that human agents have free will, and the final section of the Grounding is devoted to Kant's effort to prove that they do.

It is autonomous when it acts from a sense of duty. The will is heteronomous when it is guided by some end or moved by desire. A heteronomous will is one in obedience to rules of action that have been legislated externally to it. Such a will is always submitting itself to some other end, and the principles of its action will invariably be hypothetical imperatives urging that it act in such a way as to receive pleasure, appease the moral sense, or seek personal perfection. In any case, the moral obligations it proposes cannot be regarded as completely binding upon any agent, since their maxim of action comes from outside it.

Freedom means lacking barrier to our action that are external to our will, though it also requires that we utilize a law to guide our decisions, a law that can come to us only by an act of our own will. This self- imposition of the moral law is autonomy. And since this law must have no content provided by sense or desire, or any other contingent aspect of our situation it must be universal. Therefore we have the first maxim of the categorical imperative, that by virtue of our being autonomous we must act only on those maxims that we can consistently will as a universal law.

So, we owe to ourselves moral respect in virtue of autonomy. Since this capacity depends in no way on anything particular or contingent about ourselves, we owe similar respect to all other persons in virtue of their capacity. Hence, through the second maxim we are obliged to act out of fundamental respect for other person in virtue of their autonomy.

In the second maxim, the concern with human dignity combined with the principle of universalizability to produce a conception of the moral law as self- legislated by each for all. A rational being belongs to the kingdom of ends as a member when he legislates in it universal laws while also himself subject to those laws. He belongs to it as sovereign, when as legislator he is himself subject to the will of no other. A rational being must always regard himself as legislator in a kingdom of ends rendered possible by freedom of will, whether as member or as sovereign. Hence we have the third maxim of the categorical imperative that "act as a member of a kingdom of ends." So we have found that in Kant's philosophy, Autonomy serves as both a model of practical reason in the determination of moral obligation and as the feature of other persons deserving moral respect from us.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1. What is the autonomy of the will according Kant?

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Q.2. What is Good Will?

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Q.3. What is Categorical Imperative?

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Q.4. How can we determine the right or wrong actions in Deontology?

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Q.5. What is Heteronomous will?

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11.6 CRITICISM

Christine Korsgaard follows Kant in seeing our capacity for self-reflection as both the object of respect and the seat of normativity generally. On her view, we are all guided by what she calls a "practical identity", a point of view which orients reflection on values and manifests an aspect of our self concept. But unlike Kant, Korsgaard argues that we have different practical identities that are the source of our normative commitments, and not all of them are of fundamental moral worth. But the most general of such identities - that which makes us members of a kingdom of ends - is our moral identity, which yields universal duties and obligations independent of contingent factors.

Autonomy is the source of all obligations, whether moral or non-moral, since it is the capacity to impose upon ourselves, by virtue of our practical identities, obligations to act.

It is claimed by some critics that Kantian morality leaves too little room for the kinds of emotional reactions that are constitutive of moral response in many situations: the obligations of parents for example concern not only what they do but the passions and care they bring forth in doing it. To view obligation as arising from autonomy but understanding autonomy in a purely cognitive manner makes such an account vulnerable to this kind of charge.

The difficulty this criticism points to resides in the ambiguities of the self-description that we might utilize in valuing our "humanity" - our capacity to obligate ourselves. For we can reflect upon our decision-making capacities and value this positively (and fundamentally) but regard that "self" engaging the capacity in different ways. The Kantian model of such a self is of a pure cognizer - a reflective agent engaged in practical reason. But also involved in decision-making are our passions - emotions, desires, felt commitments, senses of attraction and aversion, alienation and comfort.

These are both the objects of our judgment and partly constitutive of them - to passionately embrace an option is different from coolly determining it to be best. Judgment is involved with all such passions when

decisions are made. And it (judgment) need not be understood apart from them, but as an ability to engage in those actions whose passionate and reasoned support we muster up.

So when the optimal decision for me is an impassioned one, I must value my ability to engage in the right passions, not merely in the ability to cold-heartedly reflect and choose. Putting the passions outside the scope of reasoned reflection, as merely an ancillary quality of the action - to consider how to do something not merely what we are doing - is to make one kind of decision. Putting passions inside that scope - saying that what it is right to do now is to act with a certain affect or passion - is another.

When we generalize from our ability to make the latter sort of decisions, we must value not only the ability to weigh options and universalize them but also the ability to engage the right affect, emotion, etc. Therefore, we value ourselves and others as passionate reasoners not merely reasoners per se.

Korsgaard (following Kant) says we must, we need not commit ourselves to valuing only the cognitive capacities of humanity but also its (relatively) subjective elements. This directly relates to the nature of autonomy, for the question of whether moral obligation rests upon and contains affective elements depends on the conception of autonomy at work and whether affective elements are included in the types of reflective judgments that form its core.



11.7 LET US SUM UP

- Kant is a Deontologist.
- Kant believed that, whenever we make a decisions, we act on a maxim. Maxims are Kant's version of intentions.
- They are the personal principles that guide our decisions.
- They are able to choose between alternative forces of actions. After an act they also feel that they could have chosen otherwise. This is a fact of experience and so must be recognized

- This self determinism recognizes freedom of will and makes clear the real or true meaning of freedom which is essential for morality.

- The sense of personal responsibility that we are responsible for what we do would be meaningless if the power of choice is denied. This is the autonomy of the will.

- According to Kant, the ultimate principle of morality must be a moral law which is capable of guiding us to the right action in application to every possible set of circumstances. Deontology says that certain types of action are right or wrong. How do we distinguish types of actions? Actions are the result of choices, and so should be understood in terms of choices.

- In Kant's philosophy, autonomy serves as both a model of practical reason in the determination of moral obligation and as the feature of other persons deserving moral respect from us.

- Autonomy is central in certain moral frameworks. For Kant, the self imposition of universal moral law (autonomy of will) is the ground of both moral obligation and the respect which others owe to us (we owe ourselves). The will ought to be guided by its own moral law or categorical imperative.

- According to Kant, the will is autonomous or free, when it is a law unto itself the moral obligation and the respect which others owe to us and we owe ourselves



11.8 FURTHER READING

1) Sinha, Jadunath. 1973. A Manual of Ethics. New Central Book Agency, Calcutta 9.
2) William K. Frankena. 1973. Ethics. Prentice-Hall, 1973
3) Lilly, William. 1964. Introduction to Ethics. Methuen.
4) Chatterji, Phanibhushan. 1952. Principles of Ethics, Calcutta.
5) Mackenzie, John S.2004. A Manual of Ethics. Surajeet Publication, Delhi.

11.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q. No. 1: Autonomy is central in certain moral frameworks. For Kant, the self imposition of universal moral law (autonomy of will) is the ground to choose of both moral obligation and the respect which others owe to us and we owe ourselves. Our ability to use reasons for our actions presupposes that we understand ourselves as free.

Ans. to Q. No. 2: A good will is an unconditional good, which is independent of other conditions. It is the good direction of the will, but not towards any particular good, - knowledge, beauty or happiness. It is the will that follows the categorical imperative. It should be promoted by pure respect for the Moral Law.

Ans. to Q. No. 3: Categorical Imperative is the internal law of conscience or practical reason. It is an "imperative" or command as opposed to an assertion of fact. A categorical imperative unconditionally demands performance of an action for its own sake; it has the form "Do A."

Ans. to Q. No.4: Deontology argues that we do not know whether an action is right or wrong unless we know the intention. We should judge whether an action is right or wrong by the agent's intention.

Ans.to.Q.No.5: The will is heteronomous when it is guided by some end or moved by desire. A heteronomous will is one in obedience to rules of action that have been legislated externally to it.

11.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

A: Very Short Questions

Q1: Is the freedom of the will is essential for morality?

Q2: Self-imposition of moral principle is the autonomy of the will. Is it true?

Q3: Whether our will is to be guide by hypothetical or categorical imperative according to Kant?

Q4: What is an autonomous will?

B: Short Questions (Answer within 150-200 words)

Q1: What are the maxims of categorical imperative?

Q2: Distinguish between the autonomous and the heteronomous will.

Q3: How the categorical imperative is different from hypothetical imperative?

Q4: What is Deontology?

Q5: What is the moral principle according to Kant?

C: Long Questions (Answer within 300-500 words)

Q1: Discuss about Kant's autonomy of the will.

Q2: Show how the autonomy of the will is related to the categorical imperative.

Q3: How the maxims of the categorical imperative are related to the autonomy of the will?

Q4: Discuss the concept of will according to Kant.

Q5: Give a critical estimate of Kant's autonomy of the will.

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