Morality in Transition: Reassessing Ethics Beyond Kant

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Abstract

This paper, entitled "Morality in Transition: Reassessing Ethics Beyond Kant," re-examines the trajectory of moral philosophy in the post-Kantian era, highlighting the enduring influence and transformation of Kant's ethical framework. Kant's moral philosophy, grounded in reason, duty, and the categorical imperative, revolutionised the evaluation of moral action by prioritizing intention over consequence. His universal, duty-based ethics not only reshaped the foundations of morality but also inspired subsequent philosophical developments. This study explores how three key thinkers—Hegel, Heidegger, and Habermas—engaged with, revised, or extended Kant's ideas. Across these perspectives, a consistent theme emerges, which reveals that morality is both self-formative and indispensable, whether conceived in abstract or concrete terms. This analysis actively demonstrates that Kant's legacy remains central to modern debates, as post-Kantian philosophy continues to draw upon, critique, and reformulate his moral vision for contemporary ethical and socio-political contexts.

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1. Prelude

Morality or ethics is a paramount theme or study of philosophy, which analytically examines the behaviors or actions of human beings to determine their inner essence or nature. This branch of philosophy is primarily concerned with values, duties, and rights that shape the way of living of rational human beings. Since this idea has occupied a crucial position in the philosophical discourse, it has a long philosophical history that enriches this topic. If we thoroughly analyse this notion, it is evident that across time, many thinkers or philosophers have interpreted this theme and engaged themselves in the debates to excavate its foundation, applicability, aim, relevance, and so on. Likewise, there is a prominent philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who placed a milestone in the domain of moral philosophy that jolted the previous foundations of this theme established by his predecessors. Kant not only proposed a new foundation but also revolutionised the domain of ethics by formulating a reason-based, duty-centred, universal morality. Even this Kantian ethical system left its mark on the later philosophies, which actively demonstrate the Kantian legacy in the post-Kantian thoughts.

Thus, this research paper intends to reassess the profound impact of the Kantian ethical system beyond him, i.e., in the post-Kantian landscape by analysing some pivotal philosophers (spanning the 19th to the 21st century), viz., G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), and Jürgen Habermas (1929-). So, before excavating the transition of the doctrine of morality beyond Kant, it is essential to shed light on the Kantian moral framework that marks its relevance not only to the post-Kantian philosophers but also to the contemporary debates concerning the interests of morality.

2. Morality in the Light of Kantianism

There are a few thinkers who have shaped the modern philosophical discourse about morality as profoundly as Kant. His vision of establishing the foundation of ethics is primarily rooted in the reasoning capacity of human beings, which provides a supreme principle for evaluating the moral worth of human actions. He termed this supreme principle the *categorical imperative*. By suggesting this supreme moral principle, he intends to provide a duty-based moral principle through which humans can identify whether an action is moral or not. If people do some actions in terms of emotion, sympathy, passion, or any kind of inclination, then, according to this principle, such actions are conditioned by these inclinations and cannot be considered moral. That means only those actions are moral that are done in terms of duty. This

argument given by Kant created another "Copernican revolution", because it again reversed the order of examining an action as moral. By stating this, I intend to mean that conventionally, people used to determine the morality of actions by their consequences. However, Kant reverses the order of judging the morality of actions and suggests that people must identify the moral actions through the intention of the agent. If an action is intentionally done out of the sense of duty, then it is moral; otherwise, it is not. In this context, Kant claimed that people can strengthen their sense of duty by enhancing their inner good will, and this inner good will is guided by our pure practical reason.

This analysis demonstrates that Kant's account of the categorical imperative commands moral laws and causes our autonomous good will. This good will enhances our sense of duty and obligation, which generates the sense of reverence for moral laws, and helps us to choose the correct maxim for our moral action. This categorical imperative teaches us to do duty for duty's sake without depending on any conditions. Similarly, this supreme principle teaches us the concept of universal law, humanity, and autonomy through its formulations. When we use certain maxims for our moral actions, we must will those actions in terms of universal law, so that our actions can not harm other rational beings. Humans must keep this universalization process in their minds to maintain and determine the moral worth of human actions.

Whether humans will use their maxims as universal rules or not totally depends on themselves, and this fact also indicates their autonomous and self-legislative nature. In this regard, Kant also suggests that if humans act according to the Kantian ethical system or in accordance with the supreme principle of morality, commanded by the practical reasoning capacity, then they can build a "Kingdom of Ends," where all rational human beings will respect each other's humanity, and never use any person as the means to accomplish some ends. Thus, in this way, Kant tries to shape his entire moral philosophy by using the supremacy of human reason. Hence, Kant's version of morality as an a priori structure intends to bind all rational human beings and reshape the moral philosophical landscape by providing a powerful counterweight to both utilitarian calculus and relativism.

Now, to fulfil the purpose of this paper, i.e., to illuminate the status and structure of the ethical system developed in the post-Kantian era, it is necessary to reassess the moral philosophical landscape beyond Kant, by exploring some selected prominent post-Kantian philosophers. So, the next section will highlight this purpose.

3. The Status of Morality in the Post-Kantian Thoughts

As noted earlier, this section aims to explore the concept of morality through the perspectives of post-Kantian philosophers. Here, I intend to proceed with certain specific questions about morality: To what extent did Kant influence his successors in shaping their moral thought? If he did, how did they engage with and adapt his legacy to develop their own moral philosophies? If not, in what ways did they diverge from him in formulating their ideas of morality? Addressing these questions is essential to uncovering the place of morality in post-Kantian philosophy. To this end, I will examine the moral theories of Hegel, Heidegger, and Habermas in chronological sequence.

To achieve the objective of this section, I begin by examining Hegel's ethical thought. A careful study of Hegel's philosophy reveals that it represents a reconstruction or synthesis of classical philosophy, particularly that of Plato and Aristotle, and the modern philosophy of Kant. The same tendency is evident in his moral philosophy. In laying the groundwork for his moral theory, Hegel seeks to reconcile Aristotle's ethical framework with Kant's notion of moral autonomy (Wood, 1993, pp. 211–216).[1] Within his ethics, it becomes clear that Hegel attempts to integrate the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia* with Kant's *categorical imperative*, thereby shaping his own account of morality and ethical life.

In his magnificent work, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Hegel, 1820/2014),[2] Hegel develops his ethical theory by distinguishing between two key terms: *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*. The question naturally arises: what does Hegel mean by these terms? While in general German usage both correspond to the English word "morality," however, Hegel assigns them distinct meanings. For him, *Moralität* refers to individual morality or conscience, whereas *Sittlichkeit* denotes social morality or conscience. He also considers this social morality as an ethical life, encompassing social practices and customs that are regarded as moral. This fact raises another

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[1] Wood, A. W. (1993). Hegel's Ethics. In F. C. Beiser (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (pp. 211-233), Cambridge University Press.

[2] Hegel, G. W. F. (2014). In A. W. Wood (Ed.), *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. H. B. Nisbet, Trans. Cambridge University Press.

question: why did Hegel find it necessary to differentiate between morality and ethical life? The answer lies in the strong influence of Kant's moral system, which Hegel both adopted and transformed to construct his own ethical framework.

To address the question above, it is necessary to highlight that in Kant's moral system, a strong emphasis is placed on the individual conscience of morality, where the awareness of moral duty is entirely intrinsic, dependent solely on human beings. By contrast, Hegel accepts Kant's position in his ethical framework and recognizes this kind of self-realization as morality (*Moralität*). However, he also introduces another dimension to his system called *Sittlichkeit* or ethical life, which extends beyond the purely individual sense of morality discussed by both Kant and Hegel. To clarify why Hegel distinguishes between morality and ethical life, we can turn to his broader philosophical claim that "everything is rational." By this, Hegel does not mean that reason is a fixed, *a priori* faculty of the individual; instead, he understands reason as an idea that progressively actualizes itself through human experience (Sterrett, 1892, p. 177).[3] In line with this view, Hegel maintains that although moral awareness must begin with the subjective self, it can only be fully realized when it is acknowledged by the objective self as well. By the "objective self" or "objective spirit," Hegel refers to the external world, i.e., the broader society and its institutions that stand in relation to the subjective spirits, or individuals.

Ethical life represents the concrete realisation of abstract morality, and such realisation is essential for genuine moral existence. In other words, mere self-awareness of morality is insufficient, and individuals must also align themselves with the moral norms established by society and culture. Hegel does not wish to confine morality to purely a priori or abstract categories; instead, he seeks to actualize it through ethical life, highlighting rational morality as it appears in the empirical world. For him, morality is meaningless without ethical life. Thus, possessing good will alone is not enough; one must also express it through right action and good behaviour.

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[3] Sterrett, J. M. (1892). The Ethics of Hegel. In J. L. Driver & C. S. Rosati (Eds.), *International Journal of Ethics*, 2(2), pp. 176-201. The University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.1086/intejethi.2.2.2375731.

It is worth noting that Kant, too, acknowledges the role of empirical experience in moral action, which can be grasped only through observing human conduct and its nature. He refers to this empirical dimension of ethics as "practical anthropology." However, throughout his moral philosophy, Kant gives little weight to this aspect, instead prioritizing the a priori foundation of ethics, which he calls the "metaphysic of morals" (Kant, 1785/1964, p. 14).[4] Hegel, by contrast, emphasises the objective standard of morality (akin to Kant's empirical ethics) over the subjective standard (Kant's purely a priori ethics). He further argues that the successful establishment of such an objective moral standard requires the state or society to create a rational moral space in which individuals or subjective spirits can transform their abstract moral insights into concrete reality. Only then can the objective standard of morality be fully realized.

Although Hegel greatly admired Kant's moral philosophy, he did not refrain from substantially criticizing it. There are several points where Hegel diverges from Kant on the question of morality. Nevertheless, as the above discussion shows, Hegel accepts the Kantian idea of the categorical imperative and the central role of rational motivation in moral awareness, using these as a basis for his own ethical thought. However, he differs with Kant's view that the essence of morality is located within the subjective mind rather than in the empirical world. Rather, he insists that subjective moral realisation must extend into the sphere of the objective spirit in order to attain its true significance, that is, its manifestation in ethical life.

Now, I turn to the next philosopher and his moral philosophy, viz., Heidegger. A thorough analysis of Heidegger's philosophy reveals that he was deeply concerned with the ontological status of *Dasein* (the human being). Within his ontological framework, Heidegger prioritizes the question of what it means to be human rather than how human beings ought to live. In other words, instead of defining the ethical status of *Dasein*, he seeks to uncover its ontological condition.

Nevertheless, Heidegger's account of morality can be approached through his ontological analysis of *Dasein*. In the process of exploring what *Dasein* is, or what it means to be human, Heidegger introduces an existential concept he calls "authenticity." He regards this

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[4] Kant, I. (1964). *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. H. J. Paton, Trans. Harper & Row, Publishers. Original work published 1785.

state of authenticity as the ideal within his version of ethics (Golob, 2017, p. 626).[5] This contention raises the question: in what sense does authenticity serve as the ideal of being ethical or moral? The answer lies in the fact that *Dasein*, or the human being, contains vast possibilities that must be actualized through authenticity. Authenticity, therefore, is essential for realizing the true essence of *Dasein*, enabling potential human beings to become actual human beings (Golob, 2017, p. 627). In this way, the notion of authenticity indirectly connects to the ethical question of how *Dasein* ought to live, or what must be done in order to live authentically. To address these ethical implications, it is essential to examine Heidegger's conception of respect.

According to Heidegger, attaining the ideal of authenticity requires a self-realization of *Dasein's* ontological status, and this awareness is made possible through respect (Lotz, 2005, p. 93).[6] Respect, directed both toward oneself and others, enables human beings to recognize that authenticity can be achieved by engaging in various possible actions under the guidance of moral principles. In Heidegger's view, respect is central, whether it concerns the essence of human beings or the moral law itself.

Notably, in his account of respect, Heidegger acknowledges *Dasein's* subjection to the categorical imperative, which clearly reveals the influence of Kantian morality on his thought. He argues that the absolute worth of the categorical imperative allows human beings to elevate themselves by cultivating mutual respect. When individuals respect themselves as possessing absolute worth, grounded in the categorical imperative, they simultaneously respect others who share the same capacity. Therefore, Heidegger maintains that the categorical imperative is not simply a moral principle but the very essence of *Dasein*, which can only be realized through mutual respect.

So, in Hegelian ethics, it is evident that Hegel criticises Kant by arguing that the categorical imperative is nothing more than an abstract principle, one that cannot be practically

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[5] Golob, S. (2017). Heidegger. In S. Golob & J. Timmermann (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of Moral Philosophy* (pp. 623-635). Cambridge University Press.

[6] Lotz, C. (2005). Non-Epistemic Self-Awareness. On Heidegger's Reading of Kant's Practical Philosophy. In D. Meacham (Ed.), *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 36(1), pp. 90-96. http://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2005.11007466.

applied in the empirical world unless it takes on a concrete form through the moral recognition of various objective spirits. Heidegger, however, diverges from Hegel on this point, maintaining that the realisation of the categorical imperative is not abstract. Instead, he claims that through this realisation, human beings are able to confront themselves and uncover their true nature, what he calls the "authentic self" (Lotz, 2005, p. 93).

This perspective highlights Heidegger's belief that by acting morally in accordance with the categorical imperative, human beings can uncover the authentic meaning of existence from the mere possibilities of *Dasein*. Thus, it becomes evident that throughout his philosophical project, Heidegger's central aim was to grasp the true essence of being (*Sein*). In pursuing this, he was compelled to examine the real meaning of human existence (*Dasein*) as well. His reflections on ethics, therefore, form part of his broader inquiry into *Sein* and *Dasein*. In this sense, Heidegger's conception of morality can be understood as an ontological account of human beings, who, as "shepherds of being," possess the capacity to disclose both themselves and the other beings of the world.

Now, it is essential to turn this assessment to Habermas and his account of morality, which is best known under the label of "discourse ethics." His idea of discourse ethics constitutes a central aspect of his philosophical contribution. In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1983/1992),[7] he presents his moral theory in a pragmatic way, emphasizing both its normative and deontological dimensions. For Habermas, moral theory serves as a tool for addressing socio-ethical conflicts, since valid moral norms provide individuals with a framework for regulating their behaviour in society, thus making conflict-free interaction possible.

This idea explains why Habermas seeks to develop a pragmatic moral theory. However, what still requires clarification is how discourse ethics contributes explicitly to resolving social conflicts. In this regard, discourse ethics may be understood as moral dialogue. Habermas argues that through rational moral discussion, it is possible to reach consensus on shared cultural and social norms (Finlayson, 2005, pp. 77–78).[8] Such a consensus enables the

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[7] Habermas, J. (1992). *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. C. Lenhardt & S. W. Nicholsen, Trans. Polity Press. Original work published 1983.

[8] Finlayson, J. G. (2005). *Habermas: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

overcoming of social conflicts and fosters harmony. In other words, within the framework of moral discourse, social, political, and cultural disagreements can be resolved by appreciating and engaging with one another's perspectives. It is also worth noting that Habermas develops his notion of discourse ethics in a manner parallel to his conception of reason, as both clearly reflect his communicative turn.

Having examined the purpose of discourse ethics, it is necessary to turn to its two central principles: the "discourse principle" and the "moral principle" (Finlayson, 2005, p. 79). The discourse principle holds that norms can only be considered valid if all those affected by them agree to take part in a rational discourse to test their validity. The moral principle, in turn, refers to norms that are freely and collectively accepted by those affected, after critically assessing their likely consequences and side effects (Finlayson, 2005, p. 81). In this sense, the moral principle represents the collective will, which can only emerge through the rules of argumentation. Thus, the moral principle rests on the foundation of the discourse principle and is realized through processes of collective or universal will-formation.

What stands out here is Habermas's persistent emphasis on the collective will of individuals in his formulation of the moral principle. This emphasis reflects his affinity with Kant's categorical imperative, particularly its formula of universalization. However, while Habermas follows Kantian morality, he also diverges from it in an important respect. Kant conceives the formula of universalization as a rational maxim of the individual mind, where it may be easy to universalize a maxim but difficult to derive a binding obligation from it. For example, one may universalize the maxim "always help those in need," yet there is no necessary obligation to act on it.

By contrast, Habermas regards universalization not as a purely mental exercise but as a social procedure (Finlayson, 2005, p. 83). His moral or universal principle shows that, unlike Kant's formulation, the validity of moral norms cannot be limited to the individual reasoning process. Instead, they must be subjected to rational discourse and impartial argumentation carried out by all affected individuals through their autonomous and collective will. From this perspective, Habermas's understanding of morality reveals discourse ethics as a rational, communicative method for resolving socio-normative conflicts. Moreover, discourse ethics can be seen as a concrete and practical extension of Kant's abstract moral philosophy.

To conclude this section, it is worth emphasizing that the post-Kantian analysis of the doctrine of morality brings to light an essential distinction between morality and ethics, where morality encompasses the whole, and ethics represents only a part of it. Morality is conceived as an abstract principle, whereas ethics is its concrete expression, i.e., the lived way of life. Another feature that emerges in the post-Kantian context is the self-elevating or self-flourishing character of morality. Most of the philosophers (whom I have explored here) highlight self-formation or self-constitution as central to understanding the moral nature of human beings. Thus, despite the many points of agreement and disagreement about morality, one conclusion remains clear: morality is an indispensable aspect of human existence, whether considered in its abstract or concrete form.

4. Conclusion

In examining Kant's influence on the moral perspectives of these philosophers, I have observed that Hegel regards Kantian morality as an abstract and subjective construct, which leads him to propose a more concrete or social counterpart, namely, ethical life. For him, morality is rooted in the self-realization of the subject, but this self-realization gains significance only when it is enacted within society or validated through ethical life, such as cultural practices, rituals, and social customs. In this way, Hegel stresses the objective validity of morality. Kant, too, gestures toward this dimension in what he calls "practical anthropology," yet he never gives it the same emphasis as Hegel gives. Heidegger, by contrast, accepts Kant's notion of the categorical imperative and argues that it fosters a sense of respect within human beings. By respecting themselves and others, individuals can attain authenticity, which enables them to uncover the true meaning of *Dasein* and *Sein*.

On the other hand, Habermas's "communicative turn" is also clearly reflected in his approach to ethics. Through his concept of "discourse ethics," he argues that rational argumentation provides the means to resolve socio-normative conflicts within a morally and culturally diverse society. In this framework, he draws on Kant's formula of universalization, maintaining that a moral norm is valid only if those affected by it accept it autonomously and universally. This idea shows Habermas's debt to Kant's universalization principle. Yet, he diverges from Kant by rejecting the moral discourse as an individual mental exercise; instead, he grounds it in collective validation. In this sense, Habermas transforms Kant's abstract morality into a concrete, socially embedded model. Although the philosophers discussed here

differ from Kant in significant respects, but none dismiss the self-forming or self-constituting character of morality that Kant emphasised.

Thus, it can be concluded that the profound influence of Kant's moral philosophy on post-Kantian thought is undeniable. Later philosophers engaged with his ideas either in support or in critique, yet his impact remained inescapable. Kant's philosophical contributions continue to shape contemporary discourse, with their relevance extending across diverse fields such as ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, political theory, and so on.

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