



## The Primacy of Duty: Exploring the Central Motive in Kant's Moral Philosophy

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### Abstract

*This article examines the concept of duty and its moral motive as expounded in Immanuel Kant's ethical theory. Explores how duty operates independently of inclination and how moral worth is determined exclusively by the motive of duty. The motive of duty lies in the good will of the actor. Kant mentions three propositions regarding duty. The first proposition is based on the principle of duty for duty's sake. Here, the motive of action is the most important consideration. What is the source of an action's moral excellence? And that comes from a formal principle or maxim, which is the subject of the second proposition. And the third proposition is reverence for the moral law. Moral law is the objective principle, there is no exception. So, the moral motive is manifested through duty for the sake of duty in respect of moral law.*

## 1. Introduction:

One of the major thinkers of modern philosophy, Immanuel Kant, revolutionised ethics by proposing a moral system based on duty and reason. As an ethicist, Kant's goal was to establish a moral ideology that would apply equally to all people, regardless of space and time. But the question arises, what is the source of this ideology? As rational human beings, we all have instincts. The act of instinct is the pursuit of happiness. So, instinct cannot determine moral ideals. Since instinct is subjective and variable, it can never be said to be a source of impersonal rules. Although Kant denied the importance of instinct in his theory of ethics, he did not deny the existence of emotion. The primary question of Kant's moral philosophy is – ‘*What ought I to do?*’<sup>1</sup> We all have a sense of morality. This sense of morality is a form of integrity. And because of the sense of morality, we choose what to do and what not to do. According to Kant, the source of this morality is practical reason, and there is a supreme principle of this morality.

The supreme principle of morality for Kant is “good-will”. For Kant, good will is good in itself, not good for what result it produces. The very nature of good will is that it is unconditional. Kant says, “*It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will.*”<sup>2</sup> Its goodness is not bound by its relation to a context or desire. Here will means executive mental state. According to Kant, “*To will is not to desire. It is to decide upon a course of action.*”<sup>3</sup> This will is determined by our reason. Here, reason means practical reason. It must produce a will, which is good. According to Kant, under the categorical imperative, only good will alone is good. There are countless things in this universe which are good. But all are conditional good, relatively good. But in Kant's moral principle, only one thing, which is unconditional good, is called good will.

## 2. Concept of Duty in Kantian Morality:

There is a matter of duty with respect to good will. According to Kant, “*A good will is manifested in acting for the sake of duty.*”<sup>4</sup> But duty has no necessary connection with good will. Because the will of God is a perfect will, which is called the holy will. So, God would

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards, Paul, *Kant selections*, ed. L. W. Beck, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988, P. 463.

<sup>2</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, translated and analyzed by H. J. Paton, Harper and Row, Publishers, New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London, 1958, P. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Korner, S., *Kant*, Penguin Books, 1977, P. 131.

<sup>4</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, op. cit., P. 18.

never act out of duty. Here, duty refers to the duty of rational beings (imperfectly rational beings). In the field of duty desire, inclinations have to overcome these obstacles. But God has no duty. As finite creatures, we have 'subjective limitations'. We do our duty by overcoming those limitations. So good will is the will of human beings and that which exists 'under human conditions'. Thus, good will is related to duty. It is guided by moral principles of duty. To explain about duty, we must first explain *the motive of duty*.

### **3. Motive of Duty in Kantian Morality:**

According to Kant, an action is morally good if it is done for the sake of duty. In performing a duty, the actor acts with a mindset that is his motive for duty. The morality of an action is judged depending on this motive of duty. To understand the matter clearly, Kant distinguishes between two actions- one is an action done for the sake of duty, and another is an action which is in conformity with duty. According to Kant, an action has moral value when it is done for the sake of duty. But if an action is done with a purpose, then the action has no moral value. An act may correspond to a duty. That means what should be done is done. However, the act cannot be called morally good. So, if there is immediate inclination and self-interest behind an action, it will be a non-moral action. Kant also claims that an act consents to duty if it requires a duty regardless of our motives for doing it. An action has its moral value only when done for the sake of duty. If there is any defect in it, the motive cannot fulfil the purpose of the work. So, Kant considers actions done solely from inclination without any motive of duty, these actions have no moral worth. Again, similarly, he considers actions done solely for the sake of duty without any inclination; these actions have moral worth. In this regard, Kant claims that "*A human action is morally good, not because it is done from immediate inclination--still less because it is done from self-interest-- but because it is done for the sake of duty.*"<sup>5</sup> So, the moral value of an action will be determined in this way, not be done from inclination, but be done from duty or the sake of duty. It is called the Motive of duty. The moral worth of an action is determined by our motive of duty itself.

Kant emphasised the autonomy of the individual agent in determining the paradigm of morality. Here, autonomy is very important. Moral agents must be autonomous. And with autonomy, the moral agent will have freedom. If one person is to be a moral agent, they must be free. Because if a moral agent is not free, then his actions cannot be evaluated from a moral point of view. And must have responsibility, with freedom and autonomy in any action. In

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., P. 18.

Kantian morality, there is no contradiction between freedom and responsibility; rather, they coexist with each other. According to Kant's moral theory, the motive of duty of a moral agent can develop with the moral principles only when a moral agent enjoys moral responsibility and individual freedom. Thus, the principle of action of a moral agent is fulfilled by the moral principle of the duty for the duty's sake.

To understand more clearly the nature of duty for the sake of duty, attention is drawn to an example from Kant. The example Kant gives here is about a shopkeeper. A shopkeeper set up a shop. He does not deceive anyone. Do not overcharge his inexperienced customers. So, it is seen that he is doing that work according to duty. But according to Kant, it is not enough to justify that he did the act for the sake of duty. He may not have overcharged anyone out of his self-interest, so he does not have a bad reputation. Here, his action cannot be called morally good. Because his action is not surely from duty, but conformity with duty. So, his action is not a moral action. And even if an action is done out of sympathy, it cannot be called morally good. According to Kant, these actions have no moral worth. An act has moral worth solely if it is done out of duty. When duty is done for the sake of duty, then the duty has moral value. So, what is my motive in any work? The moral value of an action depends on the motive.

Kant distinguishes the motive of duty from all forms of addiction. It is completely free from inclination, passion, self-interest, vested interest, situation, emotion, and everything. The genesis of Kant's motive of duty is rule-following. It is guided by moral rules and principles. And these rules and principles are non-conditional rules and principles; all are unconditional rules and principles. It has no practice in day-to-day life. It is an ideal, and it is coming from within. Referring to the single seat of the motive of duty, Kant says that human action is not morally good if it is done by natural sympathy, fear, expectation, anger, sensuous desires, etc. So even if a shopkeeper sells goods at a fair price, his actions are not always morally good. In this regard, Kant says, "*We cannot assume him to have in addition an immediate inclination towards his customers, leading him, as it were out of love, to give no man preference over another in the matter of price.*"<sup>6</sup> In that case, the shopkeeper can do the action in *conformity with duty*. Behind these may be his tendency to be sympathetic and praiseworthy. But according to Kant, such types of actions have no moral worth. For Kant, it has distinctively moral worth if it is done solely out of *duty for the sake of duty*. Thus, to him, the moral worth of an action is determined from the sense of duty, not from inclination, self-interest or natural sympathy.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., P. 65.

From the above, it appears that in outlining the paradigm of morality, Kant was very much aware of the subtle distinction between the motive of duty done out of self-interest and the motive of duty done for the sake of duty. Kant then emphasises the motive of duty as a paradigm of moral action that ultimately guides our moral action.

And to define the moral value of action, Kant then moves into the formal principle of duty. In outlining the nature of the formal principle of duty, Kant says “*An action done from duty has its moral worth, not in the purpose to be attained by it, but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon; it depends therefore, not on the realization of the object of the action, but solely on the principle of volition in accordance with which, irrespective of all objects of the faculty of desire, the action has been performed.*”<sup>7</sup> To understand the formal principle of duty, one must have a prior concept of the motive of duty. So, the motive of duty is the basis for leading formal principles of duty. Kant here interprets the term *formal principle* from a theoretical perspective, not a logical one. This principle fulfils moral universalizability from a theoretical or conceptual perspective. So, that is the rule that has been suggested by Kant, that moral principles are universalisable. Here, the concept of universalisable is very important. That means if X is good for a rational being from a particular perspective, then it is good for everybody from this same perspective. This principle is called morally universalisable. In a negative way, it can be said that nothing can be a duty, the principle of which cannot be willed as a universal law. What is being attempted here is that the formal principle of duty, in some sense, re-establishes the motive of duty in a technical sense. For Kant, moral principles are defined as ‘moral maxims’. A maxim is a principle, based on which we act. According to Kant, it is a purely personal principle. An action has moral value, and this moral value comes from a maxim. Duty is assigned according to the maxim. According to Kant, here the word maxim means the ‘subjective’ principle of action or volition. “*A maxim is the subjective principle of volition.*”<sup>8</sup> This is a personal principle of action. By this principle, the actor starts his act.

There are two kinds of maxims. One is a material maxim, and another is a formal maxim. Material maxims are empirical and are based on sensuous desires. It is also called a posteriori maxim. It depends on our experience of desire. A maxim that is applied for a particular purpose is called a material maxim. The material maxim always has some content. So, when the subjective principle of action is directed to a purpose is called a material maxim. On the other hand, when a maxim has no content, it is called a formal maxim. It is called a priori maxims

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., P. 67.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., P. 69.

because it has no sensuous inclinations. Formal maxims do not depend on our experience of desire. It does not serve any particular purpose. So, when a maxim is only derived from the sense of duty, it is called a formal maxim. That is why, Paton says, “*The maxim which gives moral worth to actions is the maxim or principle of doing one's duty whatever one's duty may be.*”<sup>9</sup> This maxim is not conducive to the achievement of any particular result. “*To act for the sake of duty is to act on a formal maxim 'irrespective of all objects of the faculty of desire'.*”<sup>10</sup> In this principle, no desire or self-interest is given precedence over duty.

So, a maxim is a subjective principle of action. A rational agent acts on this subjective principle. This principle is manifested through the actions of a rational agent. Whenever we do any action, there is a principle behind it. When a person acts according to a principle, it is their personal principle of action. According to Kant, this principle is valid only for individual subjects. And when this subjective principle takes the form of universality through goodwill, it is called an objective principle. In this regard, Kant says, “*An objective principle (that is, one which would also serve subjectively as a practical principle for all rational beings if reason had full control over the faculty of desire) is a practical law.*”<sup>11</sup> Then this principle is applied to any rational beings. It then acquired the status of a practical principle. Objective principles on which “*Any rational agent would act if reason had full control over his passions.*”<sup>12</sup> It is valid for every rational agent, and that's why they may be called ‘principles of reason’. A rational agent must act on subjective principles. He does not always act on objective principles. Whether we act on them or not, objective principles are always objective. Only when we act on an objective principle does it become a subjective principle as well as an objective principle. Kant claims, “*Only when we act on objective principles do they become also subjective, but they continue to be objective whether we act on them or not.*”<sup>13</sup>

The subjective principle is valid only for the individual agent, not for all rational agents. At the same time, it also differs from a motive in being more general than a motive. That's why it is called a principle. An animal's motive is associated with a particular smell of food. But it could not be said to generalize an animal's motive. So, it could not be said to have a maxim. Animals have a motive, but they don't have maxims. Only a rational agent can have a maxim.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., P. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., P. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., P. 69.

<sup>12</sup> Paton, H. J., *The Categorical Imperative, A Study in Kant's Moral Philosophy*, Hutchinson's University Library, 47 Princes Gate, London, 1965, P. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, op. cit., P. 20.



Because a rational agent does not always respond blindly to impulse, but animals do. A rational agent knows what he is doing. He can appreciate the quality of his actions. There is a normal principle or maxim behind all his actions. If a person gets more pain than pleasure in his life and decides to commit suicide, in that case, his maxim would be “*If life officers more pain than pleasure, I will commit suicide.*”<sup>14</sup> In this example, committing suicide is not a motive, but a general principle. Here, his maxim generalises his action with a motive. In this case, the maxim is the principle that is the determining ground of a particular person's action. But it may not be valid for all, because if everyone does suicide to relieve uncountable pain, then there is no one left to do suicide. That is why such a type of action should not be treated as a moral action. Based on this background, Kant does not support false promises in our society. To him, by doing such a type of action, we do not give respect to ourselves or others. It may be good or maybe evil. We should respect humanity. The term humanity is used as ‘*the essential human characteristic of possessing reason, and in particular of possessing a rational will.*’<sup>15</sup> We should treat anyone simply as a means to those who possess reason, but always as an end.

We see that a person's goodwill is manifested when he acts for the sake of duty. He then acts on a formal maxim and not on a material maxim. That's why to act for the sake of duty is to act on a formal maxim. When an action is done for the sake of duty, there are no sensuous inclinations, self-interest, etc. So, its value must be derived from a formal maxim, which is free from any hope or desire. Therefore, the maxim of an action done for the sake of duty must be formal, not material.

Kant also brings up the concept of divine will or holy will while talking about the maxim. Divine will or holy will is not governed by any maxim. Since we are imperfectly rational beings. Our will is judged as good or bad. So, our will is governed by the moral principle of the maxim. But divine will or holy will is not governed by any type of maxim. Because divine will is perfect will. No one can guide Him. He is self-guided. So, divine will or holy will has no maxim or objective principle.

In Kantian morality, we are dealing with “the maxim of duty”. The term “of duty” is very important. We need to understand this term. As rational moral agents, we are bound to act based on our maxims. So, acting out of obligation is nothing but acting out of duty supported by the maxim of principle. Maxim without ‘the maxim of duty’ has no meaning in Kantian ethics.

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<sup>14</sup> Paton, H. J., *The Categorical Imperative, A Study in Kant's Moral Philosophy*, op. cit., P. 60.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., P. 165.

Thus, there has been a systematic upgradation of human involvement in moral action, which begins with a motive. At this stage of motivation, there is no difference between men and animals. But in another stage, animal motives may not be formed as maxims, whereas human motives can ultimately be linked to moral maxims. This is the stage where men differ from animals, and human action is more intentional and associated with duties that differ from non-human ones. Thus, human motives are completely influenced by practical reason, that is, the maxim of duty. Such a maxim ultimately leads him to act on the basis of 'duty for the sake of duty'. According to Kant, this is how a man can express goodwill through his actions from duty.

Kant believes in an emotion that is present in actions that are done for the sake of duty. According to Kant, duty for the sake of duty means acting out of reverence for the law. Here, law means the moral law. And without respect or reverence for the moral law, the formal principle of duty cannot be comprehended. In this regard, Kant says, "*Duty is the necessity to act out of reverence for the law.*"<sup>16</sup> It is the emotion of reverence for duty. According to Kant, the emotion of reverence is unique. It is not connected with the satisfaction of any external inclination. For Kant, "*It is a feeling 'self-produced through a concept of reason'.*"<sup>17</sup> To Kant, the maxim of a morally good action is a formal maxim, which is definitely acting reasonably. It is acting on a law and is valid for all rational beings. That means there are no particular inclinations or desires. Here law must appear to us as a law of duty, which commands obedience. For Kant, such a law is considered as imposed on us; it must excite a feeling analogous to fear. Again, since it is imposed by our rational nature, it must excite a feeling analogous to inclination or attraction. This complex feeling is called reverence. It is a unique feeling. This feeling is independent of outside influence by a rational concept. Because of this feeling, our will is subordinated to a universal law. To Kant, "*Immediate determination of the will by the law and consciousness of this determination is called 'reverence'.*"<sup>18</sup>

Universality is an essential feature of law. A law, in the strict sense of 'law', must be upheld in all cases and accepted without exception. A law of nature, for example, all events must be held in time without exception. If the principle that every event must have a cause is the law of nature, there can be no exception. But by the term law, Kant does not mean 'law of nature'. For Kant, law means "*The law of freedom - that is, the law in accordance with which*

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<sup>16</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, op. cit., P. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Paton, H. J., *The Categorical Imperative, A study in Kant's Moral Philosophy*, op. cit., P. 64.

<sup>18</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, op. cit., P. 69.



*a rational agent would act if reason had full control over his inclinations.*"<sup>19</sup> This law of freedom cannot be an exception without ceasing to be a law. According to Kant, moral law never differs from person to person; it is also one that cannot have an exception. The law should be equal for all. So, the law is objective; it is not subjective. That's why, in Kant's language, universality is the form of law. Whatever a law is, whatever its subject must have the form of universality. Because it is not the law at all unless it is universal. Both laws of freedom and laws of nature share in the common form of universality.

So, an objective standard means a universal standard. According to Kant, if there is such a thing as morality, there must be a universal moral standard. It is valid for all rational agents independently of their own desire for particular ends. So, morality must have the form of universal law, which is valid for rational agents as such. And this universal law of morality will emerge only when we, as rational agents, do *duty for the sake of duty*.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks:**

A very structured and ethical framework for absorbing moral action is shown by an analysis of the nature of duty and its motivation within the framework of Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy. The idea of duty—the logical need to behave morally regardless of one's own desires or actions. It lays the foundation of Kant's ethics. Kant claims that only actions performed out of obligation have true moral value. He emphasises the special place of motive, which holds in the moral judgment of any actions. Doing the right thing is not enough; one must do it for the pure reason. Because it is one's obligation as required by the laws of morality. Kant's larger goal of establishing morality on the basis of pure reason provides the foundation for his emphasis on the motive of duty. He makes a distinction between actions done merely in accordance with duty and actions done for the sake of duty. Only the latter has true moral value, even though both may seem morally correct on the surface. Because it illustrates the autonomy of the moral agent. So, this distinction is essential to Kant's moral philosophy. According to Kant, moral autonomy is the ability to use reason to establish moral rules for oneself, independent of both internal and external influences. It goes beyond the simple freedom to choose one's own actions.

As the foundation of Kant's moral philosophy, the categorical imperative provides a strict standard for judging whether an action is morally acceptable. Consistency, universality, and

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<sup>19</sup> Paton, H. J., *The Categorical Imperative, A Study in Kant's Moral Philosophy*, op. cit., P. 69.

respect for the rational nature of all people are demanded by its formulations. According to this perspective, moral obligation is an absolute necessity that is independent of one's preferences or the conveniences of the moment. The moral agent must act only out of respect for the law and transcend contingent circumstances. Furthermore, human dignity and Kant's concept of duty are closely related. Rational beings, when they act out of duty, affirm their status as morally acceptable. This viewpoint is further supported by Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative, which states that humanity should always be treated as an end in itself and never as a means, whether in oneself or in others. Therefore, a recognition of the intrinsic value of every individual and the moral law that connects them all equally is reflected in the motive of duty.

Kantian ethics maintains that the agent's intention is the only source of moral value. The ethical depth and demands of true moral action are timeless reminders provided by Kant's insistence on the purity of moral motive in a world too frequently dominated by self-interest, practicality, and outcome-based reasoning. His philosophy encourages us to think about not just what we do, but also why we do it. And it also makes sure that our motivations are consistent with a universal moral code that all rational beings can follow. In conclusion, Kant's moral philosophy views duty as a moral ideal based on an individual's autonomy and reason rather than just a necessity. By bringing actions into line with reason and the moral law, the motive of duty raises them to a state of morality. From this perspective, leading a moral life entails a deliberate dedication to values, a respect for the rule of moral law, and a respect for the worth of other people. Moral thinking is still challenged and inspired by this vision, which emphasises that being moral involves more than just doing good. It also involves fully doing the right thing out of obligation.

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