

Philosophy - introduction to ethics



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1. Immanuel Kant was one of the greatest philosophers of the modern world. Kant's philosophy is based on rational principles. Most of his philosophical theories are stated in his books *The Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason*. He considered that as human beings endowed with reason; mankind could make and act on decisions that have pure rational background. Such acts could be held to be universally true. Due to their rationality such acts yielded complete happiness.

According to Kant only perfect duty held unconditional moral worth. The moral duty has to be based on power of rationality endowed by the nature itself. Thus moral duty has intrinsic moral worth in itself. This is derived from a priori laws that govern the creation. Basing one's life on the call of pure, practical reason leads a moral life. According to Kant 'duty' was the supreme moral notion in the world. It forms the basis of Kant's substantive ethics. But no action based on duty leads to creation of a moral law. Duty succeeds moral law and doesn't precede it. There are no 'a posteriori' conditions of the existence of moral laws. However, it has a moral worth that is unconditional and doesn't depend upon circumstance and the person. On following the duty a person derives the highest moral worth that is based on Universal laws. The realization of one's sense of duty is the greatest good and treasure trove of happiness. He held that a rational man always performed moral duty yielding the highest good and greatest happiness. Kantian reason says that these universal truths are a priori, that they exist in nature even before a man realizes them. Kant argued that only universal laws can have the power moral worth to demand abiding sense of duty from the rational beings. A law made by an authority less than nature is fallible. Nature is a perennial source of goodness but was bound by its intrinsic and

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unalterable laws. The universal laws sustain goodwill and morality lies in spreading goodwill by conforming to the universal laws by an innate yet rational belief in duty. Man has been bestowed with reason to take morally uplifting decisions and actions that not only brought him in consonance with the rational acts of others but also that of nature. Kant suggested that man's call for moral duty often comes in conflict with his own 'small nature'; desires borne out of natural impulses. But Kant emphasizes that duty borne of reason yielded the greatest happiness and duty. Thus actions done based on moral duty had the highest moral worth. Kant further argued that the morality, duty, and natural had their basis in Categorical Imperative (CI), which was the law of the autonomous will.

2.

Kant, in his attempt to drive home the message of the universality of law and doing duty in its conformance, coins the term maxim. Maxim, in fact, is the formulation of a rational being that makes him/her act according to the universal law. Universal Law at times may not be comprehensible to the individual or may come in conflict his/her will. Maxim has no conflict with the will although, it is also opaque to his/her perception as it is a subjective principle of human action. It is only the sense of duty that brings alive the maxim. The agent (human being) chooses a maxim to act according to a moral duty. The act, carried out by doing a moral duty, is an expression of the maxim. The maxim that a rational person adopts while acting in accordance with a moral motive of duty is the First Proposition or First Formulation of Maxim. This formulation helps the 'agent' to decipher the universal law.

Categorical Imperative (CI) is the most important philosophical postulate of

Kant. According to Kant, Categorical Imperative is deontological in nature. i. e. it is not dependant upon its consequences. It has an intrinsic moral worth that makes it independent of its consequences. Categorical Imperative is the moral basis for carrying out perfect duty and it decides whether a Maxim can be universalized or not. . Thus the theory of Categorical Imperative is close to the First Formulation of Maxim. Kant is emphatic that that by virtue of Categorical Imperative an action is not dependent on its consequence. Wherever it occurs, according to Kant, is the domain of Hypothetical Imperative.

Hypothetical Imperative is a concept by propounded by Kant. According to him any action that is resultant motive of duty is the hypothetical motive. “ I will drink water when I am thirsty.” In this statement the act of drinking of water is based on another condition of being ‘ thirsty.’ In the hypothetical imperative the action is the means to an end. It is dependant and not self-sustaining. The hypothetical imperative guides a person how best to achieve an end. Drinking water satiates thirst. Thus thirst and the act of drinking water is co-dependant.

Kant believes that morality must be based on Categorical Imperative because it has self-sustaining, independent morality and utility. It guides duty. On the other hand hypothetical imperative is consequential and its morality is judged by its results. It is the means to end. Categorical Imperative is an end in itself.