

Immanuel kants idea of good will philosophy essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Immanuel Kant, one of the most influential philosophers in the history of Western philosophy, in his famous work *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* discusses the idea of goodwill and how it can be attained through duty. In this paper, I plan to present Kant's overall definition of a moral act. I aim to define "goodwill" and put forward three propositions of "duty" that Kant refers to in his work. I also intend to discuss Kant's theory of categorical imperative and his idea of universalizability.

I want to start out by explaining what Kant means by goodwill. According to him, goodwill is the only thing which is absolutely good and one needs to have a good will in order to execute a moral act. Kant believes that we value good will without limitation. By this, he means that there is no circumstance under which we may need to surrender our moral beliefs in order to obtain some desirable object. On the contrary, qualities like power or courage can be diminished or sacrificed under certain situations. For example, we may not want to use our power to gain undue advantage over the weak and it may not be right to employ our courage to commit an injustice act.

Kant develops a relationship between good will and conditioned happiness. He says that our actions are good only if there is a goodwill attached to it. In other words, without goodwill, all our actions will be bad and hurtful to others. Goodwill also helps us in achieving moral satisfaction. Kant says goodwill "will shine like a jewel for its own sake as something which has its full value in itself" (Kant 62). By this he means, goodwill is good in itself and does not need justification to prove its moral value. Even if our actions do not accomplish the desired goals or lack success, as long as we have goodwill, our actions are morally the right thing to do.

After putting forward a general definition for goodwill, Kant explains the importance and function of associating reason to our will. Kant says that it is useless to impart reason in an act that is governed mostly by my welfare and happiness. The effect of attaching reasons to our thinking is nullified if we have a tendency to act out of instinct. In other words, if we impart reason to actions that are usually favored by the individual, then we are not fully making use of the function of reason. Moreover, we tend to have an inclination towards a particular side and our actions lack reason. According to Kant, the more a person uses his reason with the aim of attaining happiness and joy, the further he gets from achieving true pleasure. Those who use reason to guide themselves, without being influenced by their desires and inclination, are in a way establishing a good will. If all our observations are governed by reason, then we can be sure that we are fulfilling the purpose behind the observation. That is, if we base our decisions on reasons and reasons only, then we are in a way carrying out actions by goodwill. The use of reasons is required to achieve our purpose unconditionally and also restricts us from developing inclinations and biased choices. Kant states that reason limits the attainment of happiness; which is always conditioned and in most cases leads to overall reduction in contentment.

Kant focuses, on his paper, on the relationship between goodwill and duty and presents three propositions in regards to the concept of duty and the attributes of a morally correct act. He distinguishes the principle that lays down our duties from other sort of motives, in particular, from motives of

self-interest, self-preservation, sympathy and happiness. I aim to summarize Kant's propositions and conclude about his opinion of a right action.

He first proposes the purpose of duty and claims that motivation by duty is a source of unqualified value. Kant says that an action is morally good if performed not from any inclination, but from duty alone. This means that all our actions should not be driven by any motive of self-interest or happiness but from the sole motive of duty itself. Kant provides the example of a shopkeeper in order to explain this. A shopkeeper who charges a fixed reasonable price for his good and does not overcharge his customers may be doing so out of his own self-interest. One may perceive that the shopkeeper is being honest in his work and thus committing his action fairly and out of duty, but his true motive is to prevent his competitors from taking over his business. The shopkeeper in this case performs an action that has no real moral worth because he has selfish reasons behind his fixed priced policy. The character of an individual is said to have moral worth if the individual does good from the intention of duty alone. For example, a man, who has a miserable life and has lost all desires to live, refrains from committing suicide because of his duty to preserve his live and not from any other intention, is carrying out an action that has real moral content associated with it. In Kant's term, every individual has a strong tendency towards happiness as the idea of happiness is the root for all our other inclination. He who can avoid this inclination and perform his dealings with idea of duty alone is on the right path towards committing a moral act. However, Kant does state a case when longing for happiness is considered morally good. When a man's universal inclination towards happiness has reduced and his

willing to obtain good health has diminished, then promoting one's happiness can be considered a moral act. An example would be the case of a man suffering from terminal cancer. This individual has lost all his desires to become happy but yet, he plans to engage in enjoying the remaining moments of his life because of his duty to preserve his life.

Kant's second proposition deals with the principle of duty. He asserts that we do not have to attain or accomplish anything with our duty as long as we perform our duty in the right way. The end results of our actions are not as significant as the decision we make to perform those actions. We may have failed to achieve what we aimed for but as long as we act solely upon our duty, and have no other inclinations, our actions have a moral worth. The purpose to be attained by our actions should not influence our observations, because, if we are overly concerned with the end result of our actions, we are in a way adding an inclination to it, which in turn prevents it from having any moral content.

In Kant's third proposition he talks about the importance to act out of respect for moral law. He mentions that's motivation by duty consists of bare respect for the lawfulness. Duties are created by rules or law of some sort. For instance, the bylaws in an organization constitution establish the duties of its members. Engineering code of ethics state the duties of an engineer should follow in regards to public safety and welfare. It is our duty to fulfill and respect these codes. An action done from duty should not have any influence of inclination and only pure admiration of the law can determine the moral worth of an action. Kant may also indirectly imply a hierarchical approach to respecting the law that governs our duties. By this, I mean that a law assigns

<https://assignbuster.com/immanuel-kants-idea-of-good-will-philosophy-essay/>

us a duty only if there is no other law that we value or respect more conflicts with it. The law in my organizations guides me insofar as they do not violate city law and the city law guides me insofar as they do not require me to violate federal law (Johnson). And so on.

Finally, I plan to discuss the categorical imperative and Kant's formula of the Universal law of nature. Kant holds that the fundamental principle of our moral duties is a categorical imperative and links this to the universal law of nature. It is categorical since it applies to us unconditionally, without any reference to inclination we may or may not possess. It is imperative because it tells us exactly what is right and what is wrong. According to this principle, we must act in a way that the 'maxim' of our actions should become a universal law and Kant describes maxim as a subjective principle or rule that the will of an individual uses in making a decision. Kant, in a way, refers to the idea of universalizability, that is, whatever is right in one situation is right in any relevant situation. Kant says that we can judge our actions by considering whether we can perform the action in question if everyone else performed the same action. For example, if I ask one of my friends that I want to borrow one of his X-box games but I have no intention of returning the game back, my friends might trust me and give me one of his games and I might not return it back to him ever. In order to judge whether my action is right or wrong, I would have to assume what would happen if every individual in this world borrowed video games from their friends with the intention of not returning it. If this indeed happened, individuals would not trust their friends anymore and would stop sharing video games and I would not be able to borrow video games anymore. Thus, Kant's principle of '

Universal Law of Nature' tells me that my action is undeniably wrong. Kant also claims there may be some actions that may be able to exist under a universal law but it may not be possible to will that their ' maxims' be raised to universal status. This is because if this action is converted into an Universal law, then the action would contradict itself. That is, if our action of not caring for anyone except ourselves is made into a universal law, then, we might never be able to receive help from anyone.

The moral worth of our action does not depend on the result expected from it but depends on the way we perform our actions. The motivation behind our actions should arise solely out of duty with no inclination towards the motives of self-interest, self-preservation, sympathy and happiness. The idea of law provides the ground that helps us determine our will and execute our duties. Our actions have more moral worth if the laws that govern them become universal. Pure reverence for practical law is what constitutes duty and helps us decide if our actions are morally right or wrong

Work Cited

Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton. New York : Harper Torchbooks (1948).

Johnson, Robert, " Kant's Moral Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = .