

# EXPLORING ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF DUTY IN THE CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF IMMANUEL KANT

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**ABSTRACT:** *Moral issues had its own priorities in the philosophical thinking but a unique existence was foreign to them. They always remained as a by product of epistemological and metaphysical theories. But ethics got a different outlook in the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. What is the basis of morality that works in the present world? Does the world look good enough by the morality that is prevalent? How far social and religious moral means succeeded in meeting the ethical demands of the present world? Exploring ethical dimensions of duty in Kant can be an answer to all this questions. This paper argues that through the notion of duty Kant could free morality from the prevalent circularity in moral thinking. Duty has very common references in day to day life and always works in reciprocity. But this study tries to show that the depth of duty in Kant as unfathomable. It also tries to traces out how ethically challenging for a being who is constructed or structured in reciprocity to perform the duty proposed by Kant.*

**Key Words:** *Duty, Good will, Categorical imperative, Moral law, Reciprocity, Intersubjectivity.*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to disclose ethical dimensions of duty in the critical philosophy of Emmanuel Kant. Deep analysis of the same will reveal reciprocal and intersubjective dimensions of relation of individual who fulfils duty interpersonally and socially. Duty has very common references in everyday life. Generally the word duty refers to those actions that fulfil the formal responsibilities of life but in Kant's moral philosophy duty is considered as an objectively necessary action according to the law and any action contrary to duty is called transgression. He not only describes what duty is but explains it in relation with real life situations so it has a pragmatic face in Kant's philosophy. In order to perform duty every individual is expected to have a moral foundation; Kant calls this as natural predisposition of the mind or subjective conditions of receptiveness to the concept of duty which include moral feeling, conscience, love of one's neighbour and respect for oneself.

### WHAT IS DUTY?

'An action which is effectuated through the necessitation brought about by the moral law, is duty' (Heath 1997: 260). Kant gives very special value to such morally good actions. This special kind of value is realized when the will of the subject becomes good or act rationally. Is it possible for man to act always according to the rational will? As man have the will which is capable of being good also have other inclinations by which one decides to act that is, there are different motives possible for each and every action and the particular motive that set by the subject can be based on desires, moral laws and other inclinations of the subject. All other inclinations except moral law carry certain goals which are subjective but the actions that carried out by moral law are called duties in which goodwill operates under certain subjective limitations, 'duty does not rest at all on feelings, impulses, and inclinations but merely on the relation of rational beings to one another' (Kant 1997: 42).

Kant even questions moral worth of actions done by sympathy. In ordinary life if someone needs help who is unknown to the subject then sympathy that works mostly that is, help is rendered to those who create sympathy with in the subject. Kant did not give status of duty to those actions because it always provides an incentive to the subject either as satisfaction or as fame may be both. 'Sympathy, for kant is the feeling of pleasure or pain at another's state of joy or sorrow' (Stratton-Lake 2000: 63). On the other hand he gives moral worth to those actions which does not carry any other incentive than duty. A person who can act on duty considers those actions required of her. For instance when a person helps other based on duty considers that other who receives help has a claim on her that she is supposed to help that particular other without looking any reward or enjoyment. This does not mean that duty is an empty delusion but rather when someone acts according to duty, the maxim on which her acts are based takes the form of law. This

creates a thought in the person that she acts according to the law; this can be considered as an incentive based on duty.

### REASON WITH REFERANCE TO DUTY

Reason has a special status in Kant's philosophy and duty works in its perfection only in those persons who are rational. They are not induced by any other goals of happiness or pleasures than the laws of morality. Here rationality can be equated with holiness and man in whom, reason works in its perfect manner can be considered as holy man. Kant conceives reason 'as a capacity by which he distinguishes himself from all other things, even from himself in so far as he is affected by objects' (Kant 1997: 57). Human reason have a natural capacity to judge an action on the basis of its moral content that is reason can know what is conformity with duty and contrary to it. But just knowing is not enough to act in conformity with duty. Men are not a product of reason alone, they are also affected by other faculties including senses. For them 'duty is the necessitation of free choice through the law' (Kant 1996: 145). Kant calls those men as rational natural beings, who are subjected to all the natural feelings and these feelings are strong enough to break the law even they recognize its authority. There are also impulses of nature which may cause obstacles to man's mind but all these can be conquered by reason when the thought of duty get strengthened by the will which is good and man is not only capable but ought to do the same.

Every rational natural being is endowed with 'will' which functions as a deciding and choosing factor in every individual. 'The will is thought as a capacity to determine itself to act in conformity with the representation of certain laws' (Kant 1997: 36). This will is capable of being good but there is a possibility for the will to get engaged with other ends than duty of the individual and create a conflict with obligatory interest. If the will want to work on the basis of obligatory interest then it must become good and it is reason that makes the will good. 'The true vocation of our reason must be to produce a will that is good, not perhaps as a means to other purposes, but good in itself, for which reason was absolutely necessary' (Kant 1997: 10). It is also necessary here to mention that Kant does not consider the actions that which done on the basis of other ends as wrong but does not give the status as moral action or duty because they don't pass the test of categorical imperative.

### DIVISIONS OF DUTY IN KANT

Kant makes the basic division of duties between juridical and ethical, which determines the division of the 'Metaphysics of Morals' into the Doctrine of Right and the Doctrine of Virtue. 'The distinction between duty of virtue and duty of right is that external constraint to the latter kind of duty is morally possible where as the duty of virtue is based only on free self constraint' (Kant 1996: 148). Duties of right carry laws which are internal and external even if it affects only the external actions, while ethical duties carry only internal laws but affects both external and internal actions.

Kant makes an exposition of his political project through the doctrine of right. 'Any action is right if it can coexist with everyone's freedom in accordance with a universal law' (Kant 1996: 24) is the universal principle that works behind the duties of right. The duties that which proposed by this principle protects human dignity not only of others but also of oneself. It also proposes duties by which everyone becomes responsible for keeping what belongs to everyone as their own. Kant named these duties as narrow and formal because they work on restrictive maxims that which determine duties with precision and strictness. It forbids human beings to go beyond their nature; self preservation is its aim. Since it works in this manner it is also considered as negative by Kant.

Among ethical duties, the fundamental division is between duties to oneself and duties to others. In Kant's opinion we have our own happiness and it comes under duty towards oneself 'to assure one's own happiness is a duty (at least indirectly); for, want of satisfaction with one's condition, under pressure from many anxieties and amid unsatisfied needs, could easily become a great temptation to *transgression of duty*' (Kant 1997: 12). Here duty towards oneself can be considered only as a means to higher end. It presupposes a realm of intersubjectivity where one becomes capable of responding the other in a better way. But at the same time he does not consider it as very fundamental and primary duty of the individual because everyone will do without any hesitation, no forceful effort are needed for it. Kant considers duty towards oneself as that which leads to perfection of humanness in every individual. 'The human being has a duty to cultivate the crude predispositions of his nature, by which the animal is first raised into the human being' (Kant 1996: 154). 'Cultivate your powers of mind and body so that they are fit to realise any ends you might encounter' (Kant 1996:155).

Kant proposes subjective division of human being's duties to one self and this division is made on the basis of animal and moral nature of being. One of the divisions includes both animal and moral nature

while another division is based on only the moral nature. He has formulated three important duties in relation with the first division. They are self preservation, preservation of the species and preservation of his capacity to enjoy life (Kant 1996: 175). All these three duties represent the dignity of being a human and men have moral responsibility to live with this dignity. Kant also proposes three vices against these duties that are murdering oneself, unnatural use of sexual inclination and excessive consumption of food and drink. The second division that is human being's duty to himself as a moral being only consists in acting accordance with the inner principle based on the inner freedom. The vices contrary to this duty are lying, avarice and false humility.

In Kant's opinion we have duties only to human beings. There can be no duties towards non-human living things, or to the natural world, or to God which includes other nonhuman spirits. But the ordinary thinking contradicts it because in our life we seem to do certain duties towards them. Kant does not consider those duties as duties towards them. Although they appear to be duties to non-human beings or superhuman beings are really duties to one self. In regard to non-human animals, 'violent and cruel treatment of animals is far more intimately opposed to a human being's duty to himself, and he has a duty to himself, and he has a duty to refrain from this; for it dulls his shared feeling of their suffering and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one's relation with other men' (Kant 1996: 192-193). Analogously, Kant argues that we have duties to preserve, and not destroy, what is beautiful in inanimate nature, and to respect the system of natural ends that we find in the natural world. This too, however, is really a duty to ourselves.

Apart from the duties to one self we have duty to others. It is not so easy to do good to the other in Kantian sense. Here actions are directed not from affection but from duty. He makes division on the duties towards other on the basis of obligation that it creates on others. Performance of certain duties put other under obligation and considers it as meritorious while the performance of other is owed. Performance of these duties creates love and respect within one self for which Kant attributes special meaning.

love is not to be understood as feeling, that is, as pleasure in the perfection of others; love is not to be understood as a delight in them...it must rather be thought as maxim of benevolence (practical love), which results in beneficence... Respect is not to be understood as mere feeling that comes from comparing our own worth with another's... It is rather to be understood as the maxim of limiting our self-esteem by the dignity of humanity in another person, and so as respect in the practical sense (Kant 1996: 199).

In Kant's view the most intimate union of love with respect works in friendship and it is a duty of human beings, in Kantian terms it is an honourable duty. For Kant, 'moral friendship is the complete confidence of two persons in revealing their secret judgements and feelings to each other, as far as such disclosures are consistent with mutual respect' (Kant 1996: 216). Since it is an honourable duty the beings who engage in friendship have no right to expect anything other than giving one's at most love and respect to the other. An objective understanding of the same will not reveal it rather it may describe it as a reciprocal relationship where mutual love and respect works but one who engages in friendship cannot expect the reciprocity. The honourable duty demands an unconditional flow of love and respect towards the other. It places an infinite responsibility on the shoulder of subject which lacks a feeling of satisfaction because perfection of the duty or the purity of the moral intention cannot be seen or known by the agent who acts. So the agent who acts according to the moral law is subjected to experience an unfathomable depth within him which demands infinite attempts for doing duty for the sake of duty.

## CONCLUSION

According to Kant, 'the greatest perfection of a human being is to do his duty from duty' (Kant 1996: 155). Why he gives greatest value to action that done from duty is a question to be dealt because the very structure of human being is in conflict with the notion of duty proposed by Kant. Appreciation or reward and punishment have become an integral part of the life. A being who is formed in such a way always looks for certain rewards from all the actions that is performed or may chooses to do certain actions which are endowed with rewards. Thus rewards or enjoyment have become a necessity in order to be moral. This does not mean that everyone always goes behind actions in order to know which reward it carries but this has become very structure of moral action or the very pattern of thought in relation to moral action. According to this pattern of thought every individual set their principles on which their actions are based. So the intersubjective relation has become a mutual contract where each one form a symmetrical relation with the other. This is the real reason why everyone limits or does not flourish in the realm of morality. Kant deconstructs this very structural limitation and goes beyond this level by proposing another possibility to

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every moral being where action done just because it is the duty to do it and when a being performs the same explores new horizons of morality within him.

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