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**THE IMPLICATIONS OF KANT'S CONCEPTION OF THE ABSOLUTE
GOOD WILL FOR SOME CURRENT ETHICAL ISSUES LIKE
SUICIDE, WAR, ABORTION, VIOLENCE, CORRUPTION AND TERRORISM**

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INTRODUCTION

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant is undoubtedly one of the most influential figures in history of Western Philosophy. Born on the 22nd of April 1724 at Konigsberg, he enrolled to study theology at the university of his hometown but was later attracted to study the natural sciences and philosophy. At the end of his studies he engaged himself as a private teacher in families before he was employed in the philosophy faculty of his alma mater, the Koingsberg University, where he progressed to be a full professor in 1770.

Kant's contributions to metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, logic and aesthetics have had compelling influence on subsequent philosophical teachings. Kant is regarded as the founder of classical German idealism as well as the founder of "critical" or "transcendental" idealism (Frolov, 209). For a better understanding and appreciation of Kant's position one must understand the philosophical background he was reacting to. Two main philosophical doctrines, which had significant impact on Kant, are empiricism and Rationalism. Kant pointed out the flaws inherent in their positions as they address the epistemological question of what and how we can know. He rejected the empiricist extreme position of using only aposteriori reasoning in explaining all we can know and also rejected the Rationalist extreme position with their apriori reasoning.

In his critical philosophy as outlined in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781 Kant tried to prove the impossibility of constructing a system of speculative philosophy (metaphysics) without a preliminary study of forms of cognition and the bounds of man's cognitive abilities. This enterprise led Kant to agnosticism as he taught that the nature of things as they exist of themselves (things in themselves) is in principle inaccessible to human knowledge. We can only know things as they appear, the phenomena. Supra-sensible realities are in accessible to human reason. God, the soul, freedom, eternity etc. cannot really be known.

It has a been said that Kant's ethical theory has been as influential as his epistemology and metaphysics, his ethical work, *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) is a search for an establishment of the supreme principle of morality. While his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1787) is an attempt to unify his account of practical reason with his work in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

According to Kant, ethics has no empirical aspect, it is metaphysical. This separation of ethics from anthropology which has an empirical aspect helped Kant to ground obligation apriori in reason. This also gave Kant's ethical theory the character of necessity and universality, which would not have been possible if it was grounded empirically. Hence this his ethical theory of obligation is not dependent on any empirical factors such as consequences. He insists that the rightness of actions is grounded apriori in reason.

Kant's ethical theory proclaimed the categorical imperative as the basic law. This demands that man be guided by a rule, which being absolutely independent of moral content of an action could become a

universal rule of behaviour. Thus by Kant's reasoning, the only feature which gives an action moral worth is not the outcome achieved by such action but the motive behind it. Contrary to the formal nature of the categorical imperative, Kant put forward the principle of the *self-value* of each individual, which must not be sacrificed even for the good of the society as a whole.

It is Kant's view that the only thing that is good without qualification is the good will. With the goodwill behind our actions, one's action must always be good independent of the outcome or consequences. This paper will survey the implications of Kant's Absolute goodwill for some current ethical issues like Abortion, War, Violence, terrorism, corruption and so on. It will begin with a summary of Kant's ethical theory, which will briefly treat: the absolute goodwill, duty and the moral law, as well as the categorical and hypothetical imperatives. This will be succeeded by considering some ethical issues like suicide, war, abortion, terrorism, corruption, violence etc. the next section will survey the implications of Kant's goodwill for these ethical issues. We will finally have an evaluation and conclusion.

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2.1 KANT'S ETHICAL THEORY

Kant's ethical theory is called deontological theory. He is the primary proponent of this ethical theory. Deontology is the study of duty. It is Kant's view that what gives an action its moral worth is the motive behind it, and not the consequences or outcome of such action. Thus it is the view of Kant and other deontological theorists that:

the rightness or wrongness of actions depend on certain formal moral criteria such as rules or principles. The rules and principles in turn, are not dependent on empirical considerations of the consequences of obeying such rules and principles (Blocker&Hannaford, 213)

By removing his ethical theory from every empirical consideration such as consequences, Kant's ethics assumed the character of necessity and universality, which gives it greater force. In his ethical theory, the rightness of actions is grounded a priori in reason. It is specifically a theory of obligation.

2.2 THE ABSOLUTE GOODWILL

Kant's ethical theory hangs on the unqualified goodness of the goodwill. For Kant, the will is the faculty of acting according to a conception of law (*Internet Encyclopedia of philosophy*, Kant: Goodwill). Among his many famous ethical statements is that:

Nothing in the world- indeed nothing even beyond the world can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a good will (*Foundation*, 9) .

It is Kant's claim that apart from a good will all other things that appear intrinsically good are not unconditionally good, when looked at closely they have problems. Desirable things like courage, health; intelligence can be employed for evil purposes just as they can be used for good purposes. Hence they are not intrinsically good. Kant argues therefore that it is only the goodwill that is good without qualification or unconditionally good despite all encroachments. It is possible that the changes and chances of life may frustrate one's designs and prevent one from achieving his goal; the goodness of his will still remain. Thus it must be understood that the goodwill is not good because of its accomplishments or because it possesses certain inclination to do what is right or because it acts out of self-love. The goodwill is good in itself and is always good.

Kant denied that goodness could arise from acting on impulse or natural inclination even if these coincide with duty. According to Kant "it is not sufficient to do that which should be morally good that it conform to the law, it must be done for the sake of the law" (*Foundation*, Akademie pagination, 390). In his example, a shopkeeper might do what is in accord with duty and not overcharge a child, Kant's argues that there is a difference between a shopkeeper who did it for his own selfish end (not to attract the anger of customers) and one who did it from the point of duty and the principle of honesty (*Foundations* 398). To elucidate this point Kant presents another example and argues that the kind act of a man who overcomes a natural lack of sympathy for others out of respect for duty has moral worth, whereas the same kind act of another man who naturally takes pleasure in spreading joy does not. Kant therefore concludes that a person's moral worth cannot be dependent on what nature endowed him with accidentally. "What matters to morality is that the actor think about their actions in the right manner" (*Internet Ency. of Phil.* Goodwill). It is Kant's view that moral character is not bestowed on an action by the consequences or effect of the action, actualized or intended, all intended effects according to Kant:

could be brought about through other causes and would not require the will of a rational being, while the highest and unconditional good can be found only in such a will (*Foundations*, Akademie pgn. 401).

This opinion led Kant to conclude that it is the recognition and appreciation of duty itself that must drive one's actions. It is on this basis that Kant rejected utilitarianism, relativism, and egoism as totally inadequate ethical theories because none of them can make claims to unqualified good these theories concern themselves with the good or right which are "always qualified by consequences, by inclination or by self love" (Blocker & Hannaford, 215). With regard to why the good will is good, Kant answered that the good will is "good only because of its willing; it is good of itself" (*Foundations*, 10). This good will is good in itself and of itself. It is an "intrinsic or unqualified good". What makes it good is its very act of willing not its willing of consequences or intended effect Hence the good will is good because it acts for the sake of duty.

THE CONCEPT OF DUTY IN KANT'S ETHICS

According to Kant Duty "is the necessity of acting out of reverence for the moral law." He insists that an action assumes a moral value only when it is strictly performed for the sake of duty i.e. out of reverence for the moral law. In Kant's deontological theory two kinds of duties are distinguished "acting for the sake of duty" and "acts not because of any expected gain, not because of one's feeling or natural inclination towards such action but purely out of reverence for the moral law, i.e., "doing something because the moral law demands it, even if one stands to lose materially from such an action" (Omeregbe, 220).

On the other hand to act according to duty entails acting out of prudent considerations for one's interest. According to Kant actions in this class have no moral value though they may be good. The same holds good for actions prompted by natural inclinations or emotional feelings. Hence for any action to have moral worth or value it must be strictly performed for the sake of duty. i.e., in reverence for the moral law. To distinguish which action is right or wrong Kant employed his categorical imperative.

THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Kant employed the categorical imperative as the yardstick for distinguishing right from wrong actions. This imperative according to Kant is the principle of universalization. According to Kant, all imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically. The hypothetical imperative is a rule of action for achieving an end. A hypothetical imperative says, for example if you want to travel to Europe by flight, then you must book your flight from airlines on that route. This action of booking of flight is a means to achieve some desired end - traveling to Europe. On the other hand the categorical imperative is not conditional, as a moral imperative it is unconditional. Its imperative force is not coloured by the conditional "if you want to achieve some end, then do x". It simply states, do X.

Categorical imperatives do not present actions as means to any other end;

Actions are presented as objectively necessary in and of themselves
(Blocker & Hannaford, 216).

It is because this imperative is “pure”- free from dependence upon any inclination that it is fit to be a principle commanding our behaviour absolutely, not merely relative to certain desires or impulses given by nature (Prosch, 278). Kant calls this moral imperative an “ apodictic practical principle (*Foundations*, 78). This is because it obliges all men without exception. The imperative of the moral law is absolute and categorical and no one can be exempted from it. According to Kant there is only one categorical imperative through we have many formulations of it in his works .the categorical imperative is:

Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same
time will that it should become universal law (*Foundations*, 39).

Other formulations of the categorical imperative are “Act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature” (*Foundation*, 39) and “act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only” (*Foundations*, 46). Kant’s categorical imperative not only contains the character of universality but also the necessity that maxims conform to this law. Like the golden rule it demands that the good will must have as its maxims only that which can be willed to be moral law.

Thus in using the categorical imperative as a yardstick for determining the rightness of actions or the moral worth of an agent one has to employ its principle of universalization. From this we can say that the moral worth of agents and the rightness of actions depend on one and the same criteria, namely the categorical imperative. This categorical imperative is Kant’s first principle of morality and this is proved apriori, in a nonempirical manner, by reason. By this categorical imperative we are obliged to act in such a way that the maxim of our actions could be made into universal laws binding to all rational beings. If we can universalize our maxims then our actions are right and we are good, if we cannot universalize them our actions are wrong and we are bad.

One of the many examples given by Kant is that of a man who needs to borrow money and is considering making a false promise to pay it back. Employing the categorical imperative, we try to universalize his maxim “when in need of money, borrow it, promising to repay it, even when you don’t intend to.” Trying to universalize this maxim shows that if everybody were to act like this, the institution of promising will seriously be undermined and the issue of trust will no longer be regarded. The action can’t pass the universality test, it is wrong.

Kant therefore insists that we should do this test to judge the rightness of an action and the moral worthiness of an agent. The categorical imperative should be the standard of measuring the morality of actions. We will use the measure in looking at the implications of some ethical issues like suicide, war, abortion, violence, corruption, terrorism and so on.

SUICIDE

Suicide is the direct taking of one’s life carried out on one’s authority. Suicide can be direct or indirect. Some examples of direct suicide are: hanging of oneself, shooting oneself, taking poison etc. In this case death is directly willed either as an end e.g. euthanasia, or as a means to an end, e.g. hunger strike unto death.

Indirect suicide occurs when one “places a cause whose proper effect is not death but something else although it is foreseen that death will follow from that cause”(Pazhayampallil, 1035). In this case death is not intended but only permitted. Here one intends something which is licit and which he believes to be of a higher order to physical life. Example a pilot during war who dashes his plane loaded with bombs into an enemy warship or in the case of a shipwreck if a lifeboat is overcrowded, passengers may voluntarily jump into the sea, even though there is no possibility of being saved (Grisez & Boyle, 108).

SOME REASONS FOR SUICIDE

Among the many reasons put forward for suicide are: one's inability to cope with problems, social isolation, the feeling of being useless and being a burden to others, a hopelessly protracted and painful illness and despair. Many hallucinated individuals, in the state of feverish delirium, dementia etc. kill themselves to escape the frightening hallucinations. Some persons suffering from obsessions kill themselves under a severe stress of anxiety brought on by a crisis of some sort. Drug addiction can also lead to suicide. Other causes of suicide are: intoxication, boredom in life, disappointment in love, death of a loved one, financial setback, and humiliation. The most important cause of suicide is lack of faith in God and in the future life.

Some altruistic reasons are also given for suicide: captured spies or soldiers threatened by torture kill themselves to prevent betrayal of their companions, their accomplices or military secrets; a man kills himself to save his family from expensive long lasting treatment of his hopeless sickness; members of a resistant group also die of hunger strike for the civil liberties and rights of their people (Peschke Vol.2, 300).

ARGUMENTS AGAINST SUICIDE

In spite of these reasons put forward above in defense of suicide it is argued that direct suicide is intrinsically evil for the following reasons: (a) Man does not possess the right of ownership over his life, only God has perfect dominion over human life who has given it to man as a gift. (b) Suicide is a crime against one's obligations towards the community and dependents, for a person's life is an investment of the community which is expected to yield fruit. (c) Suicide is a violation of one's duty to love oneself and to strive for perfection (Peschke, Vol.2, 301-302).

MORAL EVALUATION OF SUICIDE

Suicide is generally regarded as a dishonorable act, which is morally reprehensible. In moral philosophy Socrates, Aristotle, Kant, Camus and others rejected it while the Stoics, Hume and modern day humanists defend it as a right of self-determination given along with human liberty. For Camus, the suicide is a coward who confesses that life is too much for him and who fails to understand life thus seeing life as not worth the trouble (*Myth*, 5). For Kant suicide is unacceptable, because the extinction of the subject of morality (man) implies the extinction of morality itself.

In positing the categorical imperative as criteria of moral evaluation, Kant insists on universalizing the maxim of our actions, among the examples he used in testing this criterion is the moral problem of suicide. In this example, "a man feels sick of life as a result of series of misfortunes that has mounted to the point of despair, but he still has perfect control of his reason to question himself as to whether his intended action does not contradict his duty to himself. He should then apply the test, to see whether the maxim of his action can be universalized to be a universal law of nature. Thus formulated:

from self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life if its continuance threatens more evil than it promises pleasure. The only further question to ask is whether this principle of self-love can become a universal law of nature. It is then seen at once that a system of nature by whose law the very same feeling whose function is to stimulate the furtherance of life should actually destroy life would contradict itself and consequently could not subsist as a system of nature. Hence the maxim cannot hold as a universal law of nature and is therefore entirely opposed to the supreme principle of all duty (*Foundation*, 85).

From the above if the problem of suicide is put to test with Kant's absolute goodwill it cannot pass. Suicide is therefore wrong. Man must face the problems and challenges of life with hope and not escape his responsibility through suicide. If this action is universalized it will lead to the extinction of the human race. A father may commit suicide because he can't feed, house, cloth or cater for the educational needs of his children. In doing this the children are thrown into serious hardships, they may also commit suicide to escape their woes, hence the extermination of the family and eventually the human race. Thus suicide contradicts man's responsibility to act for the sake of duty, or in accordance with the moral law not for selfish interest. Suicide is cowardice and selfishness.

WAR

In this paper we will deal with the problem of war in the strict sense as an armed conflict between states or large organized groups similar to states. The horror of recent wars (in Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Congo, Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, etc) as well as the dreadfulness of modern nuclear weapons raises a great and difficult question as to the moral admissibility of war.

Opinions are divided as to the morality of war, some see it as the last option to peace and freedom while others reject it totally because the evil it causes most often outweighs the harm that might otherwise befall a state. For the advocates of war, the unconditional rejection of force would be nothing but license for might to prevail (Iraq-Kuwait) hence diminishing moral and religious freedom whose loss is of greater value than physical destruction. This argument brings about some moral justification for some wars in what is today known as Just War. While war as self-defense gains greater acceptance as both a right and a duty there is the danger of belligerent expansion by stronger nations against weaker ones. This leads to putting forward some conditions under which war can be justified.

CONDITIONS FOR A JUST WAR

These conditions do not spell out permissions; they merely define limitations. Among the conditions enumerated by Peschke (594-595) include:

1. War is lawful only for a just cause i.e. in defence of vital goods of the state community –to repel an unjust aggressor.
2. All other means of non-belligerent nature must have been exhausted.
3. The war must not jeopardize still higher goods than those to be defended and there must be a sufficient likelihood of success. "When the damages caused by war are not comparable to those of 'tolerated injustice', one may have a duty to suffer the injustice"(Pius XII, 748).
4. The military action may not extend beyond the needs of just defence and the restoration of the violated rights.
5. A competent authority must order the war.

ETHICAL EVALUATION OF WAR

The widespread nature of armed conflicts in the world today makes the world so much an unsafe place to dwell. Some of these wars have so protracted or are so devastating that they pose a very difficult ethical question as to their reasonableness. It is often asked whether the above conditions can really justify the horrendous wars we have witnessed in recent times with such great loss of human life and material resources. In such case one is forced to ask whether human life still retains its great value and if it does, is it not clear to man that modern warfare threatens the continuation of the human race. In the face of the

horrors of the devastating effect of modern nuclear weapons and other precision supersonic weapons of mass destruction, the human race faces imminent extinction.

But it does not appear as simple as it looks, the question of whether a nation after exhausting all available peaceful means of dissuading an unjust aggressor should fold its arms and watch its citizenry crushed and exterminated by another power it could have repelled by taking up arms against is not yet answered satisfactorily.

Just war can even be more than a defensive war against an actual armed aggression. It is argued that even a preventive war against an unquestionably threatening, deadly aggression can also be justified. A case in hand is the Six Days War of 1967 when the Israeli Intelligence armed with a very reliable secret information of the imminent attack by Egypt and Syria, launched a preemptive strike against these enemies seven hours before they had planned to start a war that would have ruined the Israelis, this their strike destroyed the Egyptian air force leading to Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights. The question is: Should Israel have folded its arms watching themselves destroyed by the enemy?

Using Kant's categorical imperative makes this issue more complex than it appears. In the absolute sense we cannot universalize the maxim "fight when you are threatened", this will surely lead to the extinction of the human race because our existence is daily threatened by others in one way or the other.

In Kant's ethics also an action is right when it acts for the sake of duty i.e. out of reverence for the moral law. It can be argued that man has the right and duty to defend himself and his country, against an unjust aggressor. A soldier who fights in battle is doing so for the sake of duty even if his father or mother becomes the victim of the bomb he drops. The devastating nature of the battle notwithstanding, he has to forget about his personal feelings and inclinations and the consequences of his action and simply act for the sake of his duty to defend his country.

From this it becomes clear that Kant's absolute goodwill may not completely solve the morality of war. The moral justification or non-justification of war cannot be done absolutely but relatively since we cannot avoid the question of just and an unjust war.

ABORTION

Abortion has been defined from various perspectives some of which play down its moral implications. This paper defines it in a brief but strict sense of the word. Peschke defines it as "the removal of the non-viable human being from the mother's womb by human intervention, whether by killing him before removal from the womb, or whether by exposing him to a certain death outside the womb (314). Pope John Paul II in his encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* sees abortion as:

the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth (xi).

Abortion can be direct or indirect, spontaneous or induced (artificial). Spontaneous abortion or miscarriage occurs as a result of some abnormality of the developing baby or some illness on the part of the woman. Induced abortion also called direct abortion involves the ejection of human life from the uterus brought about intentionally by the patient herself or an accomplice. With regard to direct abortion, the ejection or destruction of the fetus is intended as an end of an action or a means to achieve this end, whereas in indirect abortion, the death of the fetus is merely permitted as a concomitant effect of a directly willed end (Peschke, 315). Example of indirect abortion is the death of a fetus not yet viable caused by the removal of a cancerous uterus of the pregnant mother.

REASONS PUT FORWARD FOR ABORTION

The advocates of abortion have proffered several reasons as justifying abortion; among these reasons also called "indications" are the following (Peschke, 321-322):

1. The Eugenic indication: This school advocates for abortion where there is a greater probability that the expected offspring will be affected with serious genetic or acquired defects or sicknesses

2. The Ethical indication: Here it is argued that when pregnancy is due to rape abortion is justified since the pregnancy is an undue burden forced upon the mother and also exposes her to great moral strains and social shame.
3. The social indication: Here it is argued that if the pregnancy is seen, as a great social or economic burden for the mother or the family, the child should be aborted.
4. Medical or Therapeutic indication: Here it is argued that when the life of the mother is seriously threatened by the pregnancy, the child should be aborted. Here it is also argued that for the purpose of mental health of the child, abortion is warranted.
5. Most recently the question of the fundamental right of the woman to dispense with pregnancy is being argued by pro-abortionists where sometimes refusal of abortion is said to be a violation of the right of the woman. This argument collapses when we consider also the fundamental right of the child to live.

ETHICAL EVALUATION OF ABORTION

In spite of the above arguments for abortion a directly willed and procured abortion has been rejected as intrinsically evil and wrong. Therapeutic abortions are merely permitted since the danger to the life of the mother is also a danger to the life of the child. Hence operations, treatments, and medications during pregnancy having as its immediate purpose the cure of a proportionately serious pathological condition of the mother are permitted when they cannot be safely postponed until the fetus is viable, although they indirectly cause an abortion.

This acceptance of the lawfulness of therapeutic abortion in cases of serious danger to the life of the mother is made possible by the ethical principle of "double effect" or "twofold effect". According to this principle, it is allowable to perform an action with a good and bad effect provided:

1. The good and not the evil effect is directly intended.
2. The action itself is good, or at least indifferent.
3. The good is not produced by means of the evil effect
4. There is a proportionate reason to permit the foreseen evil effect.

When this principle is put to use it becomes clear that the will plays an important role in determining the morality of an action. Hence since abortion is the direct taking of the life of an unborn child, directly willed and procured abortion is a flagrant violation of the right of a child to life and this action cannot but be intrinsically wrong.

In the light of Kant's moral philosophy, we cannot universalize the termination of the life of a child for social, eugenic or economic reasons for these do not threaten in any way our own existence. Therapeutic abortion may merely be permitted since the life of the mother and that of the child may be in danger. Justification of directly willed and procured abortion for any reason whatsoever will entail the violation of the categorical imperative which also states thus: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only" (*Foundations*, 46).

VIOLENCE, CORRUPTION AND TERRORISM

The widespread nature of violence, corruption and terrorism in the world of today poses a very big ethical question with regard to their justification partially or in their entirety. What are these social problems?

Violence whether considered as a crime in the streets or in the extended sense of psychological and institutional violence is simply a violation of a person. A person's body may suffer violence, his mind, his autonomy or his property may also be violated. It is also noteworthy that this violence may come from another person or an institution.

With regard to corruption, we may look at it as a deviation from, or perversion of, the right order for the selfish purpose of making undue gains. Corruption is a social ill which may be either institutional or personal. It seeks undue gratification in violation of the constituted norms and standards of operation.

Terrorism is a forceful violation of a person physically and psychologically as well as violation of his property and freedom in a dangerous way that even threatens his very existence. Terrorism has become so

widespread in the world today that armed groups or organizations have resorted to it in pursuance of their presumed just demands. They threaten the destruction of life, property and the social order unless their demands are met.

The danger posed by these social problems to the peace, progress and very existence of the human society has led many people to denounce them in their entirety refusing to find any ground for their justification. Some people however see these as justifiable means of ensuring ones survival in a world that seems to approve “might is right” or “survival of the fittest”. With regard to corruption it is argued to be a means of survival to make ends meet. A poorly paid worker justifies corruption as some kind of “occult compensation”. On the other hand violence and terrorism are seen as means of settling scores or pressing some presumed legitimate demands.

A close look at these ethical problems in the light of Kant’s categorical imperative and Absolute Goodwill shows that these acts in themselves are not good and we cannot universalize a maxim of action built on corruption, violence or terrorism. We cannot universalize the maxim: “when in dire need of money for the upkeep of your family, use any fraudulent means”, nor can we universalize the maxim “use violence to redress an injustice suffered at the hands of others.” To legalize any of these acts is to call for a chaotic and dangerous society, which will be very unsafe for the expression of the fundamental human rights. A society built on these social evils cannot be stable and will be devoid of progress and development.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Kant’s contributions in the field of ethical philosophy are really immense. His conception of the Absolute goodwill and his Categorical Imperative as the yardstick for the moral evaluation of actions and agents has greatly influenced moral philosophy since his time. In Kant’s view the categorical imperative is our criterion for deciding what our obligations are. If the maxims of our actions can be made into universal laws which necessarily bind all rational beings then our actions are right and we are good, if they cannot be universalized then our actions are wrong and we are bad.

The moral force of Kant’s deontological ethical theory notwithstanding, his categorical imperative as a yardstick of moral evaluation has attracted some criticisms from various fronts. Some scholars have rejected Kant’s ethical theory for its inability to handle situations where conflicts of duties arise. There may be a situation where a conflict arises between duty X and duty Y, a situation where one can only perform one and not both. For example, a man faced with the dilemma of fulfilling his duty of defending his fatherland at war with an unjust aggressor and another duty of staying behind to take care of his aged and sick mother. He cannot do both at the same time. In this case Kant’s deontological theory offers us no solution of how to resolve this dilemma.

It is also argued against Kant that his ethical theory “seems to confuse judgments of moral obligation and judgments of moral value”(Blocker & Hannaford, 218). It seems to run the two different kinds of judgments together. One can have a very humble motive and yet what he does is right, since the rightness of an action is independent of the agent’s motive. This means there is a distinction between the agent’s intention and the action’s consequences.

Another objection to Kant’s ethical theory is that it allows for no exceptions. It is too inflexible for it cannot account for cases where exceptions have to be made. There are times circumstances beyond our control make it difficult or even impossible to keep our promises or fulfill our actions wrong.

In spite of the above objections to Kant’s absolute goodwill we cannot deny the fact that his categorical imperative is a valuable guide in making ethical decisions. The ethical issues of suicide, war, abortion, violence, corruption and terrorism become wrong and unacceptable when subjected to the test of Kant’s categorical imperative since in the strict sense we cannot universalize a maxim constructed with these problems.

The intention of the moral agent must be of universal good not selfish good. The action must equally be good or at least amoral. We can therefore conclude that Kant’s ethical theory, though not without its faults, is a conscientious and valid contribution in deciding the morality of the human agent and his actions.

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