



## **A Contemporary Analysis of Kant's Concept of Goodwill and the Categorical Imperative**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper makes a contemporary appraisal of the concepts of the 'Goodwill' and the 'Categorical Imperative' in Kant's formalistic, deontological ethics. Kant posits that the rightness of an act does not depend at all on the value of its consequences. For him, in order to know whether an act is right or wrong, we need only see whether it is in accordance with a valid moral rule. The test for a valid moral rule, as he conceives it, is purely formalistic. For a moral rule to be valid, it must pass the test of the foundational, supreme principle or ultimate criterion of morality, which Kant calls the "Categorical Imperative". On this score, the paper, seeks to address the problem of ethical formalism and foundationalism associated with Kant's theory in view of the contemporary challenge of ethical pluralism and destructive postmodernism. The objective of the paper is to reconcile with Kantianism with the contemporary shift from moral foundationalism and universalism to anti-foundationalism and relativism.

**Keywords:** ethics; goodwill; categorical imperative; foundationalism; anti-foundationalism

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### **INTRODUCTION**

For centuries, moral philosophers have grappled with the philosophical problem of what should underlie a valid moral principle. The fundamental question is whether moral norms should be based on some foundational, absolute principles or on some whimsical, contextual, relative principles. What is our major concern here is that we live in an age of contextualism and relativism which casts serious doubt on the plausibility of Kant's moral objectivism and foundationalism. With this development, morality is seen as a distinctly personal matter that it makes no sense establishing a moral foundation outside of personal or cultural milieu. The question still remains, can moral truth be universalized as Kant postulated? If not, what are the implications of this development for the 21<sup>st</sup> century moral philosophy and contemporary

existence? In addressing this problem, it is quite germane to state that developments in the natural science has profoundly influenced our thought and actions in contemporary times. For example, the confidence in Newtonian physics, which is by nature deterministic and absolute, was shattered at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of Einstein's theory of relativity and the quantum theory. Isaac Newton appeared to have grasped reality by the tail and placed a lock on truth. However, the laws of inertia he developed were too deterministic and absolutist. Then came Planck, Einstein, and Heisenberg with their relativistic theories that make uncertainty the cornerstone of theoretical physics.

Destructive Postmodernism constitutes another problem for Kant's ethical theory. Although the impetus to deconstructive postmodernism is largely political, its argumentative fulcrum is epistemological. With destructive postmodernism, the idea of arriving at 'absolute truth' that would correspond point for point to reality has become more elusive than ever with the prevailing air of uncertainties.

In view of the prevailing situation in contemporary times where scientific knowledge is seen by many as the paradigm for rationality and logic, this paper argues that it would be difficult to sustain arguments that inflexibly support the Kantian moral absolutism and universalism. Again, with the growing interest in deconstructive post-modernism, moral foundationalism seems to have lost fervour. Consequently, the paper argues for the adoption of an eclectic model that is neither rigidly universalized nor capriciously relativized or whimsically pluralized. A kind of synthetic principle that makes room for flexibility without necessarily compromising what may be considered as moral truth as reason and experience may afford at any given time, in any given society.

### **Kant's Personality and Morality**

A glimpse into Kant's personality and inner life presents him as a true Pietist, having an austere and stoical disposition, disinclined to intimacy and one who remained unmarried in his life time. Perhaps what is most familiar to people in his society familiar to people in his society is the caricature of Kant as a pedantic and puritanical, pietistic Prussian whose regular and consistent afternoon (lunch time) walks the house wives of Konigsberg would set their clocks. He was neither deficient in feeling nor unappreciative of society. Herder, who in his youth attended Kant's lectures (though he latter criticized his philosophical system) described him as a seat of undisturbed contentment and joy. There flowed from his lips, he said, "a discourse rich in thought; jest and wit and humour were always at his command". Kant did not have a robust physical outlook being just five feet tall and hollow chested. He died in 1804, having never travelled outside East Prussia. Over Kant's grave was mounted a plaque inscribed in his own words: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: the starry heaven above me and the moral law within me" (Sullivan 1997:7). Kant's religious background profoundly influenced his strong belief in God's existence, in the intrinsic worth of the human person and in a universal, absolute moral principle.

### **Kant's Ethical Theory**

Immanuel Kant's ethics, as articulated in his *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, could be aptly summarized as a formalistic, deontological ethical theory. Deontology

is an ethical system which holds that the rightness of an act (and our duty to perform it) is either not entirely determined by the intrinsic value of its consequences or is not at all determined by such value. The basic principle of deontological ethics is that right (what we ought to do) is not basically or entirely dependent on the result or outcome or consequences of our action(s) (Taylor 1967: 213). This makes deontological ethics a direct contrast to the basic principle of teleological ethics which judges the rightness or wrongness of an act or rule solely on the intrinsic value of its consequences. In Kant's moral philosophy, the rightness or wrongness of an act is not in any way dependent on the value or worth of its consequence(s). For this reason, his ethics could be classified as a non-consequentialist ethical theory. Kant also insisted that in order to determine whether an act is good or bad, right or wrong, that we should examine such in the light of its conformity with a valid moral rule. Given that the test for a valid moral rule is a purely formal exercise, Kant's ethical system has equally been tagged a formalistic ethics.

The discernible prime objective of Kantian ethics is to convince us that "the basis of obligation must not be sought in the nature of man or in the circumstances in the world in which he is placed but *a priori* simply in the conceptions of pure reason" (Taylor 1967: 215). Kant wanted to show how we can establish an ultimate criterion for the validity of moral rules on *a priori* ground which is "pure" from all empirical considerations. Once this is achieved, its consequent application to specific rules and acts may require the use of empirical knowledge. One of the important implications of Kant's ethics is that the search for an ultimate criterion for the validity of moral rules is an attempt to build morality on an objective principle. Again, by establishing such rules on *a priori* grounds makes morality ratiocentric and confines the class of beings worthy of moral considerability to human beings alone.

### **The Concept of Goodwill**

Kant presented the concept of goodwill as the all-important and all-encompassing ethical concept. In his words, "Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good, without qualification, except Goodwill". Without goodwill, he reasoned, we cannot really understand what the terms, "right conduct" and "moral duty" are all about. According to Kant, "talents of the mind", "such as intelligence, wit, judgment and so on, or "qualities of temperament", such as courage, resolution and perseverance are undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects. However, "these gifts of nature" may as well become excessively bad and injurious if the will which is to make use of them is not good. The will, which Kant described as constituting what is called character, needs to be good for a right conduct to ensue. Similarly, gifts of fortune such as power, riches, honor, good health and the general well-being and contentment of individuals (which he called happiness) could lead to pride and arrogance if a person lacks good will to correct any negative influence these may have on the mind (Okpe & Basse 2019). Goodwill, therefore, seems to be sine-qua-non to worthiness of being called a happy person.

Kant further argued that there are some moral qualities which are supportive to goodwill, yet which have no intrinsic unconditional value as goodwill. They include moderation in the affections and passions, self-control and calm deliberation. These are qualities that presuppose a goodwill but are not absolutely good in themselves hence, they cannot be called good without qualification. He maintained that a "goodwill is good not because of what it performs or effects, not by its aptness for the attainment of some proposed end, but simply by virtue of the volition,

that is, it is good in itself, and considered by itself is to be esteemed much higher than all that can be brought about by it in favour of any inclination, or, even of the sum-total of all inclinations.

### **The Three Propositions of Morality**

Kant's analysis of the concept of the goodwill is captured in his "three propositions of morality". The first proposition has to do with the kind of motive an individual must possess to be rightly called a morally good person, or as Kant said it, a man of goodwill. He opined that the motive of the agent must be completely divorced from (though not necessarily opposed to) the agent's personal inclinations and self-interest. The person of goodwill not only act in accordance with duty, but equally for the sake of duty. This implies that the agent's motivation for doing what is deemed right is his/her recognition of the fact that it is the right thing simply because it is the right to do, and for no other (consequential) reason.

The second proposition of morality dwells on the moral value of the goodwill. Kant stated that an action performed for duty's sake derives its moral worth, not from the purpose (end) which is envisaged to be attained by it, but from the maxim by which it is determined. Therefore, the purpose which we may have in view in our actions or their effects regarded as ends and springs of the will, cannot give to actions any unconditional or moral value.

The third proposition of morality is a consequence of the two preceding propositions. It holds that "duty is the necessity of acting from respect for the law". Basically, it describes the kind of emotion or inner attitude that governs an individual's state of mind when he is motivated by a goodwill. This proposition prescribes that an action performed from duty must totally be free from the influence of inclination, and with it every object of the will.

### **The Categorical Imperative**

Kant designated his formalistic ethical principle "the Categorical Imperative". He argued that for a moral rule to be valid, it must pass the test of this supreme principle or ultimately criterion of morality. In all its ramifications, this principle binds the will of a morally good person independently of his inclinations and purposes. The categorical imperative demands that to act morally, a person should act on a maxim or principle which he/she, as a rational being, could prescribe as a universal moral law. In his words:

As I have deprived the will of every impulse which could arise to it from obedience to any law, there remains nothing but the universal conformity of its actions to law in general, which alone is to serve the will as a principle, i.e. I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law (1987: 215).

Kant maintained that the Categorical Imperative as the ultimate principle of morality must be grounded *a priori* if it is to have that necessity and universality requisite for a person of goodwill to identify it as the basis of duty and hence be motivated by pure respect for the moral law (Taylor 1967: 216). From Kant's standpoint, the moral law must be "apodictic", that means it must be universalizable (possessing universal applicability) and necessary (not based on contingent factors) and imperatival.

Kant declared that "all imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically" and, thus, made a distinction between a hypothetical and categorical imperative. A moral rule, he said, prescribes what we ought to do categorically, without any attachment to purpose (possible or

actual) consequences or ends. On the other hand, a hypothetical imperative only prescribes what we ought to do if we want to achieve certain desired ends or consequences based on personal inclinations. For example: “You should attend classes if you want to pass” or “Do not steal if you want to keep your job”. If we fail to seek those ends, such imperatives would definitely lose their prescriptive force. But Kant asserted that a moral rule never depends for its prescriptive force upon what ends a person seeks. For a rule to be categorical, therefore, it must prescribe a course of action that is independent of our ends (Taylor 1967: 216). The hypothetical imperative cannot serve as an ultimate criterion of morality simply because it represents the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to something else that is willed (or at least which one might possibly will) (Kant 1987: 241). On the other hand, the Categorical Imperative could serve as a standard work of morality or as valid apodictic principle because it declares an action to be objectively necessary in itself without reference to any purpose, consequence or end. In Kant’s words, “For a rule to be a moral rule, it must prescribe to us categorically, not hypothetically” (Taylor 1967: 216). Put succinctly, Kant’s Categorical Imperative is employed to represent an action as objectively necessary of itself without reference to another possible end it hopes to achieve. This moral principle is based on “*a priori* synthetical practical proposition” as Kant put it, but this, however, raises some questions about its strict practicability.

### **Formulations of the Categorical Imperative**

In order to make the categorical imperative less complex and more practicable, Kant made three different but related formulations of the principle. The first formulation of the categorical imperative grounds the moral law on universalizability. According to Kant, the morality of an action depends on its conformity to a universal law, and it is this conformity alone that the imperative properly represents as necessary. He, therefore, posited that there is but one categorical imperative, namely this: “*Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law*”. This implies that for a rule to be a moral rule, it must be universalizable by applying consistently to everyone, every culture and at any time without any exception. Kant gave four cases that are intended to be examples of consistent universalizability:

- (i) Case against suicide (ii) Case against borrowing without any intention to pay back (iii) case against indulgence in pleasure (iv) case against selfishness and lack of sympathy for others.

The second formulation of the Categorical Imperative anchors on humanity as an end in itself. It holds that for a rule to be a moral rule, it must be such that, if all men were to follow it, they would treat each other as end in themselves and never as means only. Since human beings, according to Kant, by virtue of rationality are the only class of beings that belongs to the Kingdom of ends, we must treat one another with dignity and utmost respect. In his words: “*So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only*”. Kant proposed that in society, humans as rational beings should see themselves as having an intrinsic, absolute worth and irreducible dignity as class of beings belonging to the kingdom of ends. Hence, no rational being should see the other as merely an object of a relative worth depending on some end for which he/she can be used instrumentally as a means. To act otherwise would be inconsistent to the moral rule and contrary to the nature of a rational being. Therefore, no rule of conduct based on the universalizability principle of the categorical imperative can prescribe action by which one treats another merely as a means to an

end. This second Kantian maxim, by means of illustration, disapproves of such acts as suicide, making lying promise to others, violation of human dignity and failure to improve the wellbeing of other human beings.

The third formulation of the categorical imperative is grounded on the autonomy of the will as universal legislator. It holds that “for a rule to be a moral rule, it must be capable of being self-imposed by the will of each person when he/she is universally legislating.” This is to say that if a rule of conduct is imposed upon an individual by someone else’s will (be it the will of the State, will of parents or divine will), it may not be considered a moral rule unless it is recognized by the individual himself as validly binding upon him. This principle emphasizes “the idea of the will of every rational being as a universal legislative will” (Kant 1987: 253). As Kant put: “*So act that the will could at the same time regard itself as giving in its maxims universal laws*”. The absence of the recognition of the role of personal will in the adoption of any rule of conduct would mean that the individual sees himself as being forced, or coerced (or even manipulated) to obey the moral rule, not as one under an obligation to act rationally in accordance with such a rule. The bottom line therefore, is that a moral rule is a rule that is self-imposed by a universally legislating will which binds an individual by virtue of being rational. The concept of a will that is a universal legislator and is the origin of the very rules of conduct that binds an individual irrespective of his personal whims and caprices (or inclinations) and ends is called by Kant “the autonomy of the will”. (Taylor 1967: 217).

### **Critique of Kant**

Kant’s ethics, which proposed universalistic, *a priori*, absolute moral principles, cannot be sustained in a relativistic and contextualized age we find ourselves. Today, moral rules are no longer considered absolute and universalizable in practical terms. They are, rather, seen as codes of conduct more or less haphazardly framed for group survival, and varying with the nature and circumstances of the group (Durant 1961: 218). Some critics argue that Kant’s concept of duty for duty’s sake is too, idealistic and impracticable in as much there is a motivation behind it. Some have also pointed out that no action is good in itself, as Kant believed, because it may serve some instrumental purposes, relative to peoples and cultures.

Despite its shortcomings, it would be quite difficult to downplay the significance of Kant’s philosophy. As a matter of fact, hardly any major philosophical system since the end of the eighteenth century can claim to be totally uninfluenced by Kant’s philosophy. Some scholars argue that Kant rewrote the history of modern philosophy in a way that made it impossible to conscientiously revert to earlier modes of philosophizing. It is believed that the *Critique* threw a wedge on the wheels of rationalism and jolted empiricism into nervousness and forced it to assume more refined and complex forms. Many scholars also agree that besides Hegel, no later philosophical system equals in scope with Kant’s attempt to weave together the diverse fields of natural science, ethics, aesthetics, politics, religion and theology into a united, systematic, overarching epistemological and metaphysical chain of thought (Gardner 327).

### **Kant and Contemporary Moral Philosophy**

In contemporary times, virtue ethics has reemerged as a major ethical theory owing to the growing dissatisfaction with the ‘principle’ governed (action centred) ethical systems. A number of contemporary philosophers have advanced the idea of a return to Aristotle’s ethics of virtue.

They suggest that modern moral philosophy is "bankrupt", and that, it needs to be salvaged from its bankruptcy (Rachels 1999:176). The foremost person to advance this radical idea was G. E. M. Anscombe in her article entitled: "Modern Moral Philosophy", which was published in 1958. In that article, she suggests that the modern moral philosophy is misguided because it rests on the incoherent notion of a "law" without a lawgiver. Anscombe posits that the very concepts of duty, obligation, rightness and wrongness, on which modern moral philosophy have focused attention, are connected to this incoherent notion. In view of this, she opines that philosophers should cease from thinking about such moral principles as duty, obligation, and rightness, and return to ethics of virtue as conceptualized by Aristotle (Rachels 1999:177). Apart from Anscombe, other moral philosophers such as Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Mayo, Edmund Pincoffs, and Richard Taylor, have in their respective works (see references), equally expressed their dissatisfaction with the promises of the mainstream of the modern ethical tradition and argues for a return to a virtue based ethical system (Pojman 1999:159). Such deficiencies found in the 'principle' or 'rule-governed' ethics such as the overemphasis on the principle of autonomy (as in Kant), the absence of motivational component, and over dependence on rules without reference to their origin are seen to be addressed by virtue ethics.

Despite the calls for a return to ethics of virtue, there are some fundamental problems that are inherent in the theory. The greatest of them is the claim that right actions must be understood by reference to virtue. In other words, an action is right if and only if it conforms to virtue. Ordinarily, it should have been the other way round. This seems to be a misplacement of order because it is quite difficult to justify why virtue should enjoy such priority. This vulnerable point we find in virtue ethics is similar to the problem with the Divine command Theory which holds that what makes an action right is the fact that it is commanded by the 'gods', because such commands are what creates our duty. Virtue ethics, thus, shares a basic structure and a basic weakness with the Divine command theory.

### **Kant's Ethical Monism and the Challenge of Destructive Postmodernism**

Kant's formalistic deontologism is a typical example of ethical monism. Kantianism insist on a single absolute moral rule: that is, duty for its sake. All consequential considerations have no place in this ethical system. This ethical rule, as earlier pointed out, is ultimate and fundamental. Every act that fails to comply with Kant's concept of duty is morally wrong. Ethical questioning, like all other lines of philosophical investigation, must stop somewhere. Fundamental ethical rules represent that stopping point. Suffice it to say that almost all classical moral theories are monistic. They each defend a single ultimate, absolute, fundamental moral rule in the lines of maximization of pleasure or happiness, pursuit of self-interest, categorical imperatives, and inflexible Divine commands.

The attractions of a monistic theory may be located in the quest by most people for a unification in our thinking and conduct which ethical monism readily provides. This theory can impose order on morality, and organise all moral principles by reference to a supreme, absolute moral rule (Landau, 2012: 215). However, most important versions of ethical monism have their inherent problems. First, ethical monism labours uneasily with its antithesis that morality involves not one, but different distinguishable moral viewpoints which are quite appealing as well. Second, we have to account for the variety of things whose moral appeal commands some pluralistic approach. Third, trying to force diverse moral entities into a single mold forces us to disregard some of our moral intuitions, and to dilate our overworked person-wrought precepts

into unhelpful bland generalities (Stone, 2002: 197). The commitment to monism, it is argued, is not only chimerical; it equally imposes strictures on thought that may stifle the emergence of more valid approaches to moral reasoning.

On a critical note, the absence of a comprehensive model to focus and order our competing moral concerns (in disregard of Kant) inevitably leaves us with kaleidoscopic and random, albeit capricious, moral lives. Collectively, we are left with irreconcilable fractional moral disputes. As Callicott points out, Christopher Stone's moral pluralistic standpoint, culturally generalized and interpreted, is allied with - if not equivalent to - deconstructive postmodernism (2002, p.212). Where there is no comprehensive, socially and culturally shared moral principles, we are left with plural viewpoints, relativistic perspectives and multiple ethical outlooks - each of which has an equal claim on "truth".

Postmodernism rejects fixed (absolute) solutions to standard philosophical issues and holds that there is no single, rigid, ultimate principle that could be applied in addressing any problem or issue (Stumpf and Fieser, 2003: 498). Hence, deconstructive postmodernism is averse to modern value systems that fix monistic, universal, foundational, and absolute ethical rules. These notions are totalizing in nature because they attempt to enwreath and explain all manifestations of reality (Effiwatt, 2002: 188). Kant's concept of the Categorical Imperative, for example, which seeks to universalize all moral principles and Hegel's idealistic concept of the absolute Spirit are quite all encompassing and too generalizing systems that the postmodernists try to repudiate.

In Cheney's view, a metaphysical system, as Kant's, that tries to embrace our ever-expanding human experience, to comprehend it, and to make sense out of it is not the solution but part of the problem (Callicott, 2002: 212). In any case, Cheney also seems to think that comprehensive system building in philosophy, is a decidedly modern preoccupation. Consequently, with the "demise of modernism", there has occurred a "shattering into a world of difference, the post-modern world" (Cheney, 1989: 302).

Postmodernism can assume a constructivist or deconstructivist approach. Frederick Ferre in his work, "Toward a Postmodern Science and Technology", represents what we might call 'constructive postmodernism'. He makes the point clear that modern natural philosophy, essentially classical mechanics, has been overturned by the new physics. Everything else modern - capitalism (and anti-capitalist Marxism), utilitarianism, the social contract theories, and so on - that have revolved on modern natural philosophy have been left without a foundation and centre by postmodernism. By implication postmodernism is essentially a post-structuralist and anti-foundationalist philosophy. Specifically, deconstructive postmodernism sees no need for a new metaphysics, no new fundamental principles, no comprehensive intellectual system building, no foundational structures to respond to and accommodate fundamental changes in natural philosophy. It rather seeks to dismantle any sort of modernist structures, such as Kant's moral philosophy.

It does appear, from the foregoing, that the new age of deconstructive postmodernist philosophy has created a situation void of minimum methodological agreements on how to resolve differences of moral viewpoints by informed, reasoned argument. This is the worrisome development generated by postmodernism and moral relativism in contemporary times.

## CONCLUSION

The inherent problems involved in abandoning Kant's foundationalism and adopting a relativistic, postmodernist pluralistic ethics lies in the hard choice between contradictory



indications. In the absence of a single master principle, problem arises in a situation when one of the independent principles requires a course of action different from and incompatible with the course required by one of the other independent principles. In this moral scenario, the relativist or pluralist will likely yield either to no definite, universalizable, recommendable course of action or to contradictory recommendations (Wenz, 1989: 313).

Consistency in adherence to principles is not just an indispensable character of philosophers but also the hallmark of philosophical reasoning. There is a reason for consistency arising from adherence to or derivation from a 'master moral principle'. Any attempt to act upon inconsistent or mutually contradictory ethical principles will lead to frustration of action altogether or in actions that are either incoherent or mutually cancelling (Callicott, 2002: 208). Although, Stone points out that a multiplicity of independent moral principles might just as well all converge on a single course of action (2002: 197). This seems implausible given hard choices that may be the outcome in contradictory circumstances. The practical necessity of such a relativity or plurality of principles and plurally mandated courses of action would likely be negated and frustrated. For example, the application of some ethical principles in one situation may be in direct conflict with another situation that favours ethical principles which affects a wider range of people in other parts of the globe. What ought we to do in actual or hypothetical moral quandaries that make moral choice inconsistent or contradictory? Pluralism, specifically, tells us how the different ethical theories various people hold affect their actions or inactions, but it never tells us what these people ought to have done to or not to have done for welfare of other people.

One big problem with ethical pluralism which Eugene Hargrove highlights - but unaddressed by neither Wenz nor Stone - is that this theory promotes a sort of moral promiscuity. Hargrove posits that a potential "fear that the open form in which decisions naturally and normally take place will allow unscrupulous or weak moral agents to waver and [choose] principles to their own immoral advantage (1985: 30). What this implies is that with a variety of ethical theories at our disposal, each indicating different, inconsistent, or contradictory courses of action, we may be tempted to align with the one that seems most self-serving or that suits our whims and caprices in any given situation. In this circumstance, ethical pluralism is likely to provide a sophisticated scoundrel with a bag of tricks to rationalize his or her convenience or self-interest. A more acceptable theory, this paper thinks, ought to have provided people a box of moral tools to work their way through the moral complexities of life in the human world specifically and in the all-encompassing natural world.

This paper suggests the adoption of an eclectic model that is not rigidly universalized, capriciously relativized or whimsically pluralized. A kind of synthetic model that makes room for flexibility without necessarily compromising what may be considered as moral truth as reason and experience may afford in any given society and time. In other words, whatever is considered as moral truth in a given society, though in a relative sense, should serve as a foundation for morality in such a society.

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