
UNIT 2 DEONTOLOGY AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall study one of the important schools of Normative Ethics, namely deontology. Since Immanuel Kant was the major protagonist of this theory, we shall explain this theory as he has progressively developed starting the good will leading to Freedom and Responsibility through his categorical Imperative. We shall briefly dwell on the debate between determinism and indeterminism to show the relation between freedom and moral responsibility. Finally we shall discuss the relevance of Levinas' ethics in our discussion on responsibility.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Immanuel Kant is a landmark in the history not only of Philosophy in general but also of Ethics in particular. He deserves a detailed study. Moral knowledge, Kant insists, is of what should be, and not of what is. Therefore, it does not depend, at least exclusively, on experience, but it must contain at least some a-priori elements. In fact, necessity and universality which are included in the moral precepts are marks of a-priority. The primary task of the moral philosopher, according to Kant, is to isolate these a-priori elements and to show how they originate in the practical reason (*Verstand*). This is the task Kant sets to himself as he has previously set himself the task to isolate the a-priori elements in theoretical knowledge and shown their origin in pure reason (*Vernunft*). By practical reason Kant understands pure reason itself but as directed not simply towards Knowledge but towards choice in accordance with moral law. (Sometimes Kant seems to identify it with the will; sometimes he distinguishes it from the latter. But, in any case, the will for Kant is not a blind force, but a rational power. The will chooses in accordance with known moral principles.)

It is important to understand what this set purpose of Kant is. Kant's intention is not to try and derive the whole moral law, in all its determinations, from the concept of practical reason. Kant does not even think that this could be done. In fact, he does not deny that in the moral judgment there are also included a-posteriori elements derived from experience. His intention is to discover in practical reason the nature of the moral obligation as such, that is the a-priori condition of every empirically given moral precept. He is concerned, therefore, with 'metaphysics of morals.' But he acknowledges the importance of what he calls 'anthropology' for an understanding of human nature and consequently for application of the general a-priori elements to particular concrete cases (this would be 'applied ethics'). Kant rejects all theories which try to find the ultimate basis of the moral law in human nature as such, or in any of its features, or in human life and society. For him, the ultimate basis of the moral law cannot be anything else but pure practical reason itself. Hence Kant's 'rationalism.'

2.2 GOOD WILL

He starts by analysing the idea of 'good will' – the only thing which we can call 'good' without qualification. In fact, it is the only thing which cannot really be misused and which is good in itself and not because of any beneficial results which may accrue from it. Now, Kant discovers that a 'good will' is a will which acts for the sake of duty alone. In other words a 'good' will acts not merely in accordance with, but out of 'reverence' for the moral law as such. A 'good will' does not act for self-interest or because it is impelled by some natural inclination, but it acts because duty (moral 'obligation') is duty. This 'rigorist' attitude of Kant is to be rightly understood. He does not mean to say that to act because of a legitimate self-interest is immoral. Nor does he undervalue good inclinations. On the contrary. What he does mean, however, is that the ultimate basis of the moral law as such – the source of the moral obligation – is the moral law itself. This is, according to Kant, the salient feature of moral consciousness.

2.3 CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Now, since universality is the 'form' of the moral law, Kant proceeds to analyse what this universal form of the moral law is and to translate it into terms of the concrete moral life. In other words, he proceeds to try and formulate this universal form as a principle to serve as a criterion for the moral judgment. And Kant formulates it thus: "I am never to act otherwise so that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law." Kant gives other formulations, but points out that all his different formulations are intended to bring this universal form of the moral law closer to intuition and therefore to feeling.

Kant calls this universal form of moral law the 'categorical imperative'. It is 'categorical' because it is distinguishable from the 'hypothetical' which lays down a condition upon one only if one wants to attain some end – whether this end is in fact sought by all, for example, happiness (and in this case, the hypothetical is 'assertoric'), or sought only by an individual, for example, wealthy (and in this case, the hypothetical is "problematic") it is 'imperative' because it necessitates or obliges unconditionally the will (while leaving it physically free).

When Kant comes to prove the existence of such a ‘categorical imperative’ he remarks that if it does exist, there must be a ‘synthetic a-priori’ connection between the concept of the will of rational being as such and the categorical imperative. It must be ‘synthetic’ in the sense that it cannot be deduced from a mere analysis of the terms, and ‘a- priori’ in the sense that it cannot be derived from experience either. Here, Kant’s line of thought is not easy to follow. But what he seems to drive at is to show that the only possible ground of the categorical imperative must be an end which is absolute and not relative (therefore valid for all humans) and posited by reason alone and not by subjective desire (which can give rise only to the ‘hypothetical’). Now this end can only be human person as such. A person, therefore, is an end in oneself and the only possible ground for the categorical imperative.

Hence another formulation of the universal form of the moral law would be this: “So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, always and at the same time as an end and never merely as means. “ Notice the word ‘merely.’ Kant is aware that we cannot help making use of the services of other men and therefore using them as means to some extent. This leads Kant to posit human person (or the practical reason) as the source of the moral law. Human person’s will is autonomous in the sense that it gives itself the moral law which it obeys. It is not at the mercy of desires and inclinations forming part of a causally determined series.

2.4 FREEDOM AS ONE OF THE THREE POSTULATES

Kant turns to the question as to how this practical synthetic a-priori imperative is possible. Kant finds it possible in the ideal of freedom. We must remember that in the critique of Pure Reason, Kant had tried to show that freedom cannot be proved: it can only be said to be negatively possible in the sense that it does not involve a logical contradiction. But here, in the Critique of Practical Reason, Kant arrives at positing assumption of freedom is a practical; necessity for the moral agent. Freedom is a ‘condition of possibility’ of the categorical imperative. Even though freedom cannot be ‘theoretically proved’, this practical assumption is for Kant sufficient for concrete moral action and for Ethics.

But this means too that, according to Kant, human person does not belong only to the ‘phenomenal world’, the world of determined causality, but also to the ‘noumenal world’. For Kant the ‘supreme good’ is virtue that is the making of one’s will accord perfectly with the moral law. Still, virtue is not the totality of human’s actual desire. Human person also desires happiness. So the ‘supreme good’ must contain two features: virtue and happiness. Here again the connection between the two must be synthetic and a-priori. But Kant observes that empirical experience does not warrant the connection between virtue and happiness. This leads Kant to posit two other postulates: the immortality of the soul and the existence of God.

It is to be well understood, however, that for Kant the acceptance of the three postulates is not simply pragmatically useful. On the contrary, he goes as far as to maintain that this knowledge of the practical reason regarding the super-sensible compels theoretical reason to admit the objects of the postulates, leads it to think

of them by means of the ‘categories’ and to give the ‘ideas’ (which in the first Critique are merely ‘regulative’) a definite form and shape. So, starting from moral consciousness, Kant establishes a ‘metaphysics of morals’ which finally leads to Religion that is to ‘the recognition of all duties as divine commands Not as arbitrary commands, contingent in themselves, imposed on human person as if it were by an alien will, but as “essential laws of every free will in itself”. Still, these essential laws must be looked on, according to Kant, as commands of the Supreme Being, because it is only from a morally perfect and at the same time all-powerful will – and on our part, only from acting in harmony with this will – that we can hope to obtain the highest good which the moral law enjoins us to make the supreme object of our endeavour.

There is no need for us to speak any further about Kant’s ideas about Religion. But, for completeness’ sake, we add a few remarks. Kant tries to interpret Religion ‘within the bounds of pure reason’. For him, religion consists in leading a moral life. He understands the Christian Dogmas in the light of his moral philosophy. (He has interesting things to say. For example, ‘original sin’ is understood as the fundamental propensity to act out of self-love.) Similarly, he looks at the Church as an approximation to an ideal spiritual union among human persons leading a life of virtue and of moral service to God. In his last book, published posthumously; Kant is inclined to the idea that awareness of our moral freedom and of our moral obligation is an awareness of the Divine Presence.

Kant’s Moral Philosophy is often labelled as formalistic, abstract, a-prioristic, rationalistic. But a painstaking study of Kant will show that these terms are highly misleading. Such study is indeed rewarding. Perhaps no philosopher has brought out, better than he, the nature of the moral obligation (its formal element), its independence of empirical experience (its a-priori character) and its foundation in reason (its rational aspect). One must not criticize him for what he left undeveloped but which he admitted (e.g. our having to take into account an empirical experience of human nature to apply the universal categorical imperative to concrete situations)

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is ‘good will’ according to Kant?

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2) Why does Kant call the moral law as the ‘Categorical Imperative’?

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3) According to Kant, Is the practical synthetic a-priori imperative possible?

2.5 HUMAN FREEDOM AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

One of ‘immediate data’ of moral consciousness is the sense of ‘satisfaction’ or ‘guilt’. We find ourselves holding ourselves and other responsible for our and their actions. Now, when we hold ourselves or others morally responsible for our or their actions, we assume that the action was done knowingly and willing in other words freely. We can hardly hold somebody responsible for his action, unless his action was done freely. The idea of responsibility would seem then to connote and presuppose that of freedom.

The question whether or not, and human person is free is not ethical question. Still, since this question is, obviously, extremely pertinent to Ethics, and especially contemporary Ethics, we simply cannot overlook it. How is this question pertinent to Ethics? On the practical level, if it is proved that human person is not free, but that all his actions are determined by causes which are beyond his wilful control, then it would be pointless for one to ask what one should do on such and such an occasion: indeed all study of morality would be done away with. Even without going to such extremes, a human person who finds himself ‘compelled’ to perform certain actions which he/she thinks or is told that they are bad, may come to the conclusion, on learning that human actions are not free, either that his actions are after all not bad, or that there is nothing he/she can do about it. He/she is ‘made that way,’ it is therefore ‘natural’ for him/her to act the way he/she does, and there is nothing to worry about. Hence on this practical level, the question of human freedom has a philosophical relevance for the very meaningfulness of ethical theory depends on its answer.

It is mostly on the normative ethical level that the question of human freedom is asked. The question will then be this; is it morally justified to praise or blame, reward or punish somebody for his/her acts? The answer to this question does not depend, strictly speaking, on whether human actions are determined or undetermined but rather on the normative ethical theory one holds (‘teleological’ or ‘deontological’). On the meta-ethical level, the question of human freedom is still different. The question here will be this: Does the term ‘right’ logically connote ‘free’? Suppose a human person commits an act of murder, can I logically say that he/she has committed a ‘wrong’ action? If I cannot prove that his/her action was free or undetermined by other causes, and if (depending here on the meta-ethical theory I hold) ‘wrong’ does connote ‘free’, I simply cannot say that he has committed a ‘wrong’ action. So, we must squarely face the question: what is the meaning of human (and Moral) freedom? Is human person morally free?

2.6 DETERMINISM VERSUS INDETERMINISM

Determinism is that philosophical theory which holds that everything and every event, and therefore too human person and his actions, are irresistibly caused by some other preceding thing or event (or sets of things or events). One is reminded of the theory of David Hume in this respect. But the discovery of the 'unconscious' and of its influence on the human conduct would seem to confirm the thesis of determinism. There would seem to be no reason to exclude human behaviour from the rigid determinism governing all physical reality. If it is so, one cannot speak of 'free' human actions and no one is justified in attributing responsibility to anyone for his actions. Two contemporary authors who hold such a deterministic position seem to be C. Darrow and P. Edwards. Other determinists, however, use the utilitarian view that is 'morally good. Accordingly it is that what is conducive to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. They maintain that even though reward or punishment for their actions will result, or tend to result in their own good or society as a whole. This is particularly the case for whom such blame or punishment is conceived in terms of a retributive justice.

Notice that determinism is not the same as fatalism. On the contrary, the theory of the former is incompatible with the theory of the latter. Whereas for determinism everything or event is explainable by preceding causes and therefore predictable, for fatalism nothing can be said to be the cause of anything else. Things and events just happen and are therefore unpredictable. There is a milder sort of determinism. Admitting the deterministic principle that everything or event necessarily has a cause, mitigated determinism asserts that as far as human actions are concerned, it is enough that this cause be internal to the subject (e.g. his/her beliefs, character, desires, and heredity) for them to be called free and responsible. Indeed only if actions are so internally determined by the subject, can they be called his/hers? If they were completely undermined, how could they be responsible? Not only then this kind of determinism is compatible with moral responsibility, but only it is.

Some authors would however not go as far as to say that if one's beliefs, character, etc. were different, one could have chosen to act on a different way than one did. For them such a question belongs to Metaphysics. But as Ethicists, they say that it is impossible to claim that one's choice of action in such and such a way is not determined by this internal cause. And this for the simple reason that all we know is that one has chosen to act in such a way and there is no way for us to know what would he have chosen to do had he been other than he in fact is. Attributing moral responsibility to human persons for their actions (and therefore praise or blame, reward or punishment) is morally justified in terms of 'consequential justice', namely the good educative, reformative preventive results ensuing from such an attribution.

Indeterminism (or as it is today called 'libertarianism') upholds the freedom of the human will against all kinds of determinism and rejects all kinds of 'causes,' external or internal, of human actions. A human person cannot said to be responsible for his/her actions unless he/she not only could have done otherwise if he/she had chosen but also could have chosen otherwise. But indeterminism would mean her 'self-determination'. The self or the human person is a unique kind of agent which itself determines its own choices, desired and purposes.

‘Reasons’ or ‘motives’ are to be distinguished from ‘causes’. One can act for (or because of) a reason but not from causes. If it is objected that it is difficult to see how a motive can be translated into action, it is pointed out that non-human causation is no less ‘mysterious’ than human causation (which is ‘immanent’ as distinct from non-human or ‘transit causation’) Such a position is taken by all upholders of human freedom. We have seen how Kant ‘postulated’ human freedom of morality. But as far as we know, no philosopher has insisted on human freedom so much as Sartre among contemporary ethicists.

2.7 EXISTENTIAL SITUATION AND HUMAN FREEDOM

According to the existentialists, morality must be defined by each autonomous individual. The individual and the world are entirely without meaning, literally “absurd.” Any meaning that gets into the world must be put in it by the individual, and that meaning or value will hold only for that individual. A person’s world is what that person chooses it to be. Each individual lives in his/her own world and what one is what one chooses to be. Jean-Paul Sartre is the major protagonist of this view. Sartre holds that human person is condemned to be free. This is so because Sartre denies anything called human essence. If there is something of a human essence independent of what one makes out of one’s own existence, it presupposes that there is someone transcendent called God who gives essence to the human person. But Sartre out-rightly rejects the existence of God and hence human person is condemned to be free. Thus the individual self must create his/her own value. Just as the world is defined by the choices regarding knowledge that an individual makes, so the individual must express his/her own preferences about things. In making choices, or defining values, the individual self becomes responsible for those choices. Hence responsibility becomes a hallmark of Sartrean philosophy. Anyone who fails to assume responsibility is, according to Sartre, in bad faith, that is to say, that the individual is being false to self. It is a breaking of one’s personal law.

An Existentialist is not necessarily a non-conformist, but if an Existentialist conforms to the values of a group it will be because that person has freely chosen to do so - not because that person has been pressured to do so by the group. Individual choice and responsibility are thus primary concerns for the Existentialist. Existentialism is not necessarily a “selfish” type of philosophy. It is not so much concerned with one’s own interests but rather with one’s own conscience freely formed and assumes responsibility.

2.8 LEVINAS’ PHILOSOPHY OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE OTHER

Levinas is a contemporary French Philosopher and a Jew by origin. He is known for his philosophy of the other and for making ethics as the first philosophy by critiquing ontology. In his masterpiece *Totality and Infinity* he holds that “the work of ontology consists in apprehending the individual not in its individuality but in its generality. The relation with the other is here accomplished through a third term [the concept] which I find in myself.” We grasp the other, not as individual, but by classifying and categorizing him/her. In doing so, we miss the ethical relation, whose focus is the individual.

Levinas calls into question Plato's doctrine of recollection because it does harm to the otherness of the other. According to his doctrine of recollection, to know is to recall what is already within the self. The "ideal of Socratic truth" implied by this is to remain within the concepts one already has. Levinas equally criticizes his professor Edmund Husserl for doing violence to the otherness of the other. Though Husserl does not recognize the other as an object, his doctrine of inter-subjective recognition falls within the traditional metaphysical framework. Through the inter-subjective recognition, I recognize the other as an embodied subject insofar as he/she is like me, that is, interprets a situation as I would and behaves accordingly. Thus, it is *in terms of my categories* that I accept that another person is also a subject. Hence Levinas affirms that philosophy has been egology because I know through concepts that I have generated by my activity of contrasting and comparing depriving the other of his/her deprived of its otherness. Levinas calls this totalization. The tie between war and totalization is evident. War "establishes an order from which no one can keep his distance; nothing henceforth is exterior. War does not manifest exteriority and the other as other." In a situation of war, we want to know everything and we can do this only through concepts that keep away the otherness of the other. We thus conceal the ethical relation to the other.

Levinas vehemently criticizes Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general inevitably leading to imperialist domination and tyranny. The inner distance for Heidegger is caused by my being ahead of myself. For Levinas, however, its cause is the absenting other. For Heidegger, my futurity is grounded in my being ahead of myself in my projects and plans. For Levinas, the authentic future is what is not grasped, but rather constantly escapes the being present that we do grasp, we have to say that "the other is the future." For Heidegger, we are able to confront ourselves, because we are ahead of ourselves. We are there awaiting ourselves at our goals. Identity here is like Nietzsche's definition: we are over time the promises we make to ourselves and keep. For Levinas, it is the other who gives us the inner distance that allows us to confront ourselves. We are forced to regard ourselves from his perspective, his interpretation. He calls us to respond to him. In doing so, we achieve our self-identity.

For Heidegger, "the fear of dying is greater than that of being a murderer" ("*la crainte d'être assassin n'arrive pas à dépasser la crainte de mourir*"). It then follows that for Heidegger my obligations concern *my* being. My anxiety revolves around its loss. Given that my being is the locus of my obligations, there is nothing for which I would sacrifice my life. Therefore I cannot get out of egotism, that makes myself the primary focus of my concern. This egotism characterizes the whole of the West: We gain mastery through conceptual schemes, but lose the other and the ethical relation to the other.

For Heidegger, death, which is uniquely my own, individualizes me. For Levinas, it is my relation to the Other that individualizes me. I can be a for-itself only by responding to the Other in the uniqueness *occasioned by the Other*. The other who calls on me to respond places my "I in question." The face of the other calls me to be responsible for the other. The ambiguity of the face is that it both calls forth and tears itself away from presence and objectivity. The calling forth occurs in the fact that I can "see" the face of the Other. Synthesizing my experiences, I can describe and represent its physical features. The face, however, is not a

catalogue of such features. Insofar as it is grasped as the face of another person, it is grasped as exceeding this. There is a certain absence or non-presence in my grasp of the other as other. The result is that the conscious subject liberates himself/herself from himself/herself. Another result is the awakening of the for-itself (l'éveil du pour-soi) by the non-absorbable otherness of the other. But one cannot be responsible, even self-responsible, without the other. This is why, Levinas in his another famous work *Ethics and Infinity* says, "Responsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another." The fact that the *Dasein* (Self) is itself accounted for by ethics, by the relation to the other, ethics is prior to ontology.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is determinism?

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2) Give the importance of Freedom in Sartre's view

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2.9 LET US SUM UP

Deontology basically deals with our moral obligations. Moral obligation or human duty presupposes human freedom. Hence along with our discussion on categorical imperative of Kant, we have also brought into discussion the philosophical views of the existential thinkers regarding freedom especially those of the champion of freedom Jean-Paul Sartre. Such a freedom paves way to responsibility not only for oneself but also for the other as is conceived by Emmanuel Levinas.

2.10 KEY WORDS

Indeterminism : the philosophical theory that upholds the freedom of the human will and rejects all kinds of 'causes,' external or internal, of human actions.

- Categorical Imperative** : In the ethical system of Immanuel Kant, an unconditional moral law that applies to all rational beings and is independent of any personal motive or desire.
- Egology** : A term used by Levinas to denote the philosophy which privileges the self to the detriment of the otherness of the other.
- Deontology** : Ethical theory concerned with duties and rights.
- Postulate** : Something assumed without proof as being self-evident or generally accepted, especially when used as a basis for an argument.

2.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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