

## "DUTIES TO ONESELF" - A REFLECTION

DEBIKA SAHA

Moral values are not separable from cultures. That means, moral values and norms are interdependent. So moral assessment of human actions has to include both consequences concerning the particular objects of action and those concerning the wider social and cultural environment. The practice of selling one's organ for money is now a trend in our society. Those cases are referred here where people are forced to take such types of decision under circumstantial conditions. The question is, can this act be considered moral? In *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant states that we have duties towards our own bodies and any deviation in performing these duties gives rise to an argument that certain trends in our society are wrong. This paper will present Kantian views on this issue. It is divided into two sections. Kant's notion of duty to oneself will be discussed in the first section. And the second section will highlight the arguments that Kant adduces against selling of bodily parts.

### I

The concept of duty is associated with morality. So, what is morality? It is an accepted fact that the concept of morality arises only because we are living in a society with varied interests. We can be happy or suffer, languish or flourish, whereas rocks and trees cannot. These interests form part of the dynamic ongoing process and constitutes an integral feature of our life-process. As human beings, we have unlimited desires and demands. But these desires and demands are curbed by certain codes of conduct. One way of defining morality is that it is a device designed to counteract the natural

tendency of human beings to selfishness, the tendency to be moved more by their own needs than by those of others.<sup>1</sup>

According to Kant duties to oneself fall within the purview of 'essential morality' and this should be treated first. He feels quite disappointed by the attitude of philosophers that no one has framed a proper concept of self-regarding duty. He remarks, 'Just as an innkeeper gives a thought to his own hunger when his customers have finished eating, so a man gives a thought to himself at the long last for fear that he might forget himself altogether'.<sup>2</sup>

While explaining his position, Kant makes it clear that duty to oneself is not to be confused with prudence. In *Lectures on Ethics* he says, 'In fact, the principle of self-regarding duties is a very different one, which has no connection with our well-being or earthly happiness'.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, 'Not favour but self-esteem should be the principle of our duties towards ourselves. This means that our actions must be in keeping with the worth of man'.<sup>4</sup>

The above view of Kant is echoed and clarified in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, where in he argues that the content of our duty is determined by the categorical imperative. In its second formulation it shows that we should always act so as to treat humanity, whether in our person or that of another, as an end and never as a means only.<sup>5</sup> It is because human beings should be treated in a certain way, that we have obligations to ourselves qua human beings. Kant emphasizes the preservation of human worth, and he depends on a notion of certain acts as intrinsically degrading. If we indulge in such acts we lose our worth.

In *Lectures on Ethics* he remarks that man is free to dispose of his condition but not of his person. '... he himself is an end and not a means; all else in the world is of value only as a means, but man is a person and not a thing and therefore not a means'.<sup>6</sup>

Here a question may arise what this 'duties to oneself' mean? If a person says that he has duties towards his body, it might naturally be thought that he sees himself, as a moral agent distinct from his body, thus taking a dualist view.

But in *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant clearly mentions, that he deals with an idea of the completeness of the whole person, a concept of the person as necessarily embodied. In the Lecture on, 'Duties towards the Body in regard to life', he says, 'Our life is entirely conditioned by our body, so that we cannot conceive of a life not mediated by the body and we cannot make use of our freedom except through the body'<sup>7</sup>

## II

Let us now consider what Kant says about duties towards the body and their implications in the context of selling bodily parts.

It is a common practice now to sell bodily parts for money. Here only cases are taken into consideration where people have no other way but to take such drastic steps. In private columns of newspapers, often advertisements of kidney-transplantations are offered in exchange for money. What are the arguments of Kant against the selling of bodily parts?

In *Lectures on Ethics*, 'Kant says, 'a human being is not entitled to sell his limbs for money, even if he were offered ten thousand thalers for a single finger'<sup>8</sup> The argument that he offers here is as follows, 'If he was so entitled, he could sell all his limbs'.<sup>9</sup> He adds further, we can dispose of things which have no freedom but not of a being which has free will'.<sup>10</sup> According to Kant, to sell oneself, even a part of oneself, is wrong, because we are beings which have free will and beings of this sort are not to be sold. The main objection that Kant offers here is, by selling oneself one makes it impossible to exercise freedom in future. Though it can be questioned here whether selling of a finger does lead to such a consequence. Kant Elaborates :

'A man who sells himself makes of himself a thing and, as he has jettisoned his person it is open to anyone to deal with him as he pleases'<sup>11</sup>

Kant seems here to invoke a notion of what is intrinsically degrading to human being. The main point that he offers is that, human beings, having free will, are simply not the sorts of things that should be bought and sold

and if one offers any part of oneself for sale, then one makes oneself an object for other people's pleasure.

He has another argument for the impossibility of selling one's body. He says, 'Man cannot dispose over himself because he is not a thing, he is not his own property; to say that he is, would be self contradictory, for in so far as he is a person, he is a subject in whom the ownership of things can be vested, and if he were his own property, he would be a thing over which he could have ownership. But a person cannot be a property and so cannot be a thing, which can be owned, for it is impossible to be a person and a thing, the proprietor and the property. Accordingly, a man is not at his own disposal. He is not entitled to sell a limb, not even his teeth'<sup>12</sup>

But the above view that 'a man is not at his own disposal', itself contradicts what he says elsewhere. According to him, in some circumstances we do have rights of disposal over our own bodies. Kant says in the Lecture, 'Suicide'.

'We may treat our body as we please provided our motives are those of self preservation. If, for instance, his foot is a hindrance to life, a man might have it amputated. To preserve his person he has the right of disposal over his body'<sup>13</sup>

But if a person can have his foot amputated to save his life, why not sell his kidney to meet the economic crisis that he faces urgently? It is also from the motives of self-preservation that he feels the need to sell a part of himself.

One of the undesirable consequences of selling our bodily parts is, here bodies of persons are taken as resources. This action contributes to the fact of everything being for sale, everything having a price. The seller of bodily parts encourages the purchaser to think that everything is within one's reach for a price. Kant's remark that the seller makes himself an object in the purchaser's eye expresses this insight.

But this action of the seller should not be judged alone. We have to

see the social condition in which these sorts of situation arise. As we said in the very beginning, the action and consequences of any individual should be judged within the social and cultural environment. For, it is not rich people who sell their organs. It is people who find themselves in situations where there's no way out but to opt for sale of an organ. (Excluding those business oriented people who make this kidney - transplantation as a mode of their business) It is the economic necessity which forces people into this type of action and thus, the question whether individuals are free to make a choice, does not here arise at all. We have to unearth the social condition which led a person to commit such an action. We have to examine the infrastructure and the economic resources of our society. In other words, the essence must be explored, without relying upon appearance, otherwise truth will never come out.

Thus, if selling of organs are undesirable from a moral point of view, it is not enough to suggest that they are undesirable, we have to create also that environment where people can perform desirable acts.

#### NOTES

1. J.L. Mackie, *Ethics : Inventing right and wrong*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977, Chap-5.
2. I. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield. Harper & Row, New York, 1963, P.117.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, P.124
5. I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans, J.J. Paton as The Moral Law, Hutchinson, London, 1948, P. 91
6. I. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, P.120
7. *Ibid.*, P. 147-148
8. *Ibid.* p.124
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid*

11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p.165
13. *Ibid.*, p.149