

## THE MOTIVE OF DUTY AND DISINTERESTEDNESS

It is well-known that according to Kant moral value consists in disinterested performance of one's duty, whatever that duty may be. It is the doctrine of duty for duty's sake. This is quite in keeping with commonsense ethics or with generally accepted notions about morality. The idea that duty is to be done not for any ulterior gain but simply because it is duty may seem quite unexceptionable. Nevertheless, the idea requires elucidation. We have to see what is involved in it in order to clearly understand it and judge its tenability.

For Kant the moral worth of a human action, as also of the agent doing it, depends on the motive from which it is done. It does not depend upon external consequences. Even if the results or effects turn out to be bad or disagreeable, the action or the agent may not be condemned if the intention is morally sound. It is the motive or intention that is crucial in moral evaluation. Given a good intention, a surgeon is not necessarily to be blamed even if the surgical operation happens to be unsuccessful—due, say, to some unexpected adverse circumstances.

Kant contrasts the motive of duty with the motive of inclination and the motive of self-interest. Inclinations are natural propensities or habitual desires such as the disposition for sympathy or the desire for pleasure. Self-interest may be said to lie in such things as personal profit, power, fame etc. When an action is solely prompted by these ends or by anger, fear, sympathy, sensuous love etc., it has no moral value—though it may be appreciated or commended for other reasons. Moral value is determined by the sense of duty.

What is it to do something from the sense of duty? First, it is doing something on principle, not just on the spur of the moment. A dutiful action is done deliberately as an action of a certain type according to a certain principle. But is not wrongdoing also capable of being done on purpose and on principle? Certainly there can be methods and principles in wickedness also. Therefore, dutiful actions not only are based on their specific principles; they also satisfy a general fundamental principle, which wrongdoing violates and which non-moral actions are not at all concerned

with. This fundamental principle is Kant's Categorical Imperative. It is a formal principle, since it abstracts from all specific duties and lays down the general condition of duty as such.

The general condition is that of universalizability. Put in a negative way, it lays down that nothing can be a duty the principle of which cannot be willed as a universal law. Stated positively in a rough way, it is the law that if something is a duty for someone in certain circumstances, it is so for everyone else under relevantly similar circumstances. Detailed interpretations apart, there can be little doubt that this formulation grasps a very basic point about morality. A moral principle, if anything, is a principle of equality and justice. It is no respecter of persons. This is implicitly recognised and is often explicitly appealed to when immorality of an action is alleged or is sought to be exposed. The principle of laying or of breaking of promises cannot be universalized, as Kant has shown. The moral offender by his action seeks to gain some special advantage for himself which he is not prepared to give everybody. He is selfish. The selfish man does not or cannot want everybody also to be selfish, for then the very purpose of his selfishness is defeated.

Kant thinks that this basic general principle of morality can be used as the touchstone for moral assessment of lesser principles of action. For example, he argues that this test rules out suicide, lying, unkindness and laziness, as the maxims of these types of actions or attitudes cannot be generalised. He maintains that the attempt to raise the maxims of suicide and lying to the level of universality results in self-contradiction and that it is just not possible to want everybody to be idle or unkind. But the point is controversial. It may be quite possible to think of circumstances in which suicide becomes morally permissible and lying becomes duty, not incompatible with Kant's principle of universal law. Why should the law be so interpreted as to disallow suicide or lying or violence or anything else under all circumstances? The maxim of killing or lying under specific types of situations may well be universalized. The result is that the universal-law-formula is not such a sure test of morality as Kant supposed.

In fact, the formal criterion of generality is not the sole determinant of morality. Positive moral duties or moral goals are not derived from any formal law. A moral principle has not only a formal aspect but is goal directed also. Kant speaks of reason or

rationality or man as such as the supreme end of morality. He makes this end the basis of division of duties to one's own self and duties to others, the former being directed towards self-perfection and the latter towards happiness of others. Even these are not very clear goals ( the meanings of 'perfection' and 'happiness' being indefinite ), nor the means to them very certain. But the enunciation of moral goals does not make Kant's theory result-oriented. For he insists that the moral value of an action or of the agent is determined not by actual results but by the motive and the principle. If one does something for making others happy from the motive of duty ( i. e., in pursuance of the principle of promoting others' happiness ) then his action is commendable even if happiness does not result owing to some unforeseen contrary circumstances.

For Kant then to act from the motive of duty is to act for the sake of certain principles which subserve certain ends and which can be willed to be generally adopted. As he puts it, " Duty is the necessity to act out of reverence for the law. " <sup>1</sup> Every subordinate moral rule is, as it were, a reflection and a carrier of the supreme law which lays down the formal condition of universality. That law is unconditionally binding—it is the Categorical Imperative. But what is meant here ? Is it meant that to act morally in certain circumstances is at least to want the principle of action to be adopted universally ? It may well be doubted if this is invariably so. A man, for example, may well decide to remain celibate or a vegetarian on moral grounds without any wish to foist the principle on others, even in analogous circumstances. For celibacy or vegetarianism may not be the sole or sure way to moral advancement, there being the possibility of free adoption of other ways.

This, however, is not an objection for the total rejection of the principle of universality but for softening its rigidity. But there is another objection which is more serious. The reason why a moral prescription is binding may not lie in its universal admissibility but in its goal-directedness. It may be that moral principles and prescriptions have their unique value and appeal because of the ends they serve. This perhaps goes against a fundamental tenet of Kant's theory of ethics—that of the categorical imperative. For it is saying in effect that no moral imperative is categorical—all are conditional as concerned with means and ends. It is doubtful if morality is at all possible without teleology. In

Kant's system of ethics also, there is the discussion of ends—the supreme end of rationality and other subordinate ends. But if moral rules and commands are always sustained by their appeal to goals, it is difficult to understand the talk of their unconditional necessitation. If there be any supreme end, it even has to be opted or adopted before it can necessitate. Thus the constraint exerted by such an end also would be conditional upon its acceptance.

Since the Kantian theory of a-priori certainty and absolute authority of the categorical imperative is open to doubt, the explanation of the notion of dutiful action in terms of this theory is not likely to be very convincing either. It is doubtful whether there is any absolute law or command of reason, same for everybody. Duty, then, cannot consist in following such a law or command in one's actions. Nor is it possible to derive multifarious human duties from any such principle of reason, aided or unaided by other facts of human nature. For example, it is hardly possible to prove that a life of selfishness is bad because it is a violation of reason or that a life of moderation and benevolence is good because it is enjoined by reason alone. There is considerable force in the view that reason, as a power of intelligence, is in itself neutral and does not set any end—but that it can be used for ends, good, bad or indifferent.

If this be the nature of reason, then Kant's opposition between reason and inclinations is misplaced, though the struggle between inclinations and moral endeavour is not. In morality the struggle is not between reason and unreason—but between selfishness and unselfishness, between sensuous inclinations and certain other goals. Moral progress lies in the control or overcoming of the obstacles of our animal nature. Kant has emphasized the point that in the moral field the opposition of our sensuous nature is essential and that moral excellence is assessed in terms of opposition withstood or overcome.

But what can be regarded as the basis of duty in this picture, when reason is no longer regarded as its sole or sure sources? Here various alternative answers are possible and perhaps there is no neutral or non-committed way of deciding between them. In philosophy one can try to analyse and lay bare the fundamental differences between the theories of moral obligation. But to recommend choice between them may not be a philosophical task.

for such choice does not seem to be determined by any conclusive theoretical considerations.

One theory is that duty is dictated by conscience. It is natural to suppose that every man in society, in course of his normal development, acquires moral susceptibility. By its means he is able to discern his particular moral duties of commission and omission. Not only that. It also appraises him, by appropriate affective tones of satisfaction or remorse, that a duty has been done or has been violated. Thus a man can be immediately aware that he has done his appropriate duty in a specific situation or has transgressed it.

The role of conscience in the discernment performance or non-performance of duty cannot be gainsaid. But it has also to be recognised that man is not born with conscience; it is formed and developed in him in course of his life. The functioning of conscience is the result of moral education and training. The intimations and verdicts of conscience may be immediate, but this immediacy presupposes a process of conditioning, more or less intelligent. Sometimes moral ideas, principles and norms current in society are absorbed by the individual rather passively and uncritically; and sometimes they are subject to critical assessment and consequent modification. Behind the summary judgments of conscience often lie elaborate ways of learning. The dictates of conscience are like habitual actions in that they have turned automatic through practice.

Conscience may apprehend moral worth and may dispense moral justice; it may even effect slight twists and turns to prevalent moral ideas. But many would find it hard to regard conscience as the creator or source of moral norms. To recognise duty is one thing; to lay it down is another. Conscience is always of the individual man. It is only metaphorically that we speak of social or collective conscience. Duties form part of a moral system in society. They become incumbent on individuals in society in accordance with their roles and functions. An individual in society finds his duty apportioned. He does not create his duties. If every individual were the author of his duties, then there would be not mere conflict of duties but chaos; for then each would fix his duties according to his own advantage. But duties are not thus deliberately made, though they may have to be deliberately performed. It is not individual conscience but social convention that determines

duty. Moral duty is not invented or created by any individual it is tradition-bound.

Some trace the genesis of moral duties in religion. In most religions, the central concept is that of God. Where God is conceived as the moral governor, He rewards the virtuous and punishes the wicked. Moral duties are supposed to be based on His commands or prescriptions which are revealed in some way. The argument that what is done in the hope of reward or for fear of punishment is devoid of moral worth does not hold here. The reason may be that the achievement of such reward (at the hands of God) is regarded as the ultimate goal. In religion the ultimate goal is always beyond mundane pleasures and possessions, whether God is admitted or not. Performance of moral duties is regarded as conducive to this goal. All this might seem repulsive to the atheistic or anti-religious temperament with its emphasis on reason. Those who uphold the theory of autonomy of morality would also reject any talk of derivation of moral duties from religion. But in fact there is no logical absurdity involved in the view that morality is subservient to religion, particularly when religious truths enlist the support of certain modes of knowledge and experience which are said to be superior to sense-experience and inference.

Perhaps the claims of conscience, convention and religion as regards determination of duties are not as irreconcilable as their separate presentation might suggest. Perhaps we should follow conscience in respect of some duties, adhere to convention as regards some others and look to religion for still others. Perhaps conscientious duties, conventional duties and religious duties—all within the moral field—can form a hierarchy. On the other hand, it may well be that a neat reconciliation between the conflicting claims is not to be expected; for if it were possible, moral knowledge and moral life would have been much less ridden with perplexity than it actually is. Striking the balance here is not easy. Is it uniformly possible either?

In this confusing picture of claims and counterclaims, what would count as *disinterested* performance of duty? Does it consist in following conscience unswervingly? Or, is it acting, with great steadfastness, in accordance with social norms? Or, does it lie in scrupulously adhering to the prescriptions and prohibitions of one's own religion?

Many cultured and intellectually oriented people do not profess

any religious faith. Religious commands do not have any hold on them. But if for this reason we are to say that they are incapable of being actuated by the motive of duty, that would rather be a hard and blind judgement—too restrictive and untrue. For example, hard-core communists possibly reject religion altogether. Yet it can hardly be doubted that a sincere communist is capable of exemplary self-sacrifice and devotion to duty in accordance with his ideology. Similarly, a person who revolts against certain social rules and conventions may well do so from a sense of duty. In facing social stigma he may exhibit great moral courage. It is through such conscientious revolts that salutary changes in morality are often initiated. But even conscience is not infallible. Its deliverance may, on occasions, be wrong or mistaken. It is quite possible for self-interest to assume the garb of conscience and thus go undetected. Disinterestedness therefore may not always be faithfully reflected in conscientiousness either.

Yet a person, who is not religion-oriented and who does not regard social rules etc., as sacrosanct, has to follow the guidance of his conscience in matters of morality—and in such following would lie disinterested performance of duty. It is perhaps quite possible for one to be deliberately self-centred as far as practicable and to opt out of morality, as it were. But if one at all subscribed to the moral point of view, he has nowhere to look to for direction except conscience, if he happens not to have faith in religion or in social norms etc., as regards moral matters. This would be so, even admitting the possibility of what may be called 'fake conscience.' In such a case, it may be said that one should obey what one takes to be the command of conscience after reasonable scrutiny. It is not impossible that in spite of all cautiousness and vigilance, what is taken to be the unmistakable judgement of conscience is not really so but is only the prompting of successfully masked selfishness. Yet, under the circumstances there would be nothing better than to be faithful to what is regarded as conscience. Where there is no guarantee of disinterestedness, there may still be all the reason to strive for it.

Similarly, disinterestedness may find expression in doing certain actions solely on the ground of rules or conventions of one's society or religion. For example, truthfulness may be sought to be strictly adhered to for such a reason. Of course social recommendations are often not very clear-cut and

often it is not easy to distinguish between the externals of a religion and its essence. Actions that are perfectly normal and unobjectionable within a system of religious or social morality may seem utterly atrocious and immoral to an outsider. One may wonder how such actions could at all be performed with moral fervour. But moral systems are relative to different goals and values. Absolute morality is a theoretical concept, it being a fact that there are differing moral orders, based upon a relativity of what are taken alternatively as absolute values or supreme goals.

The concept of disinterested performance of duty, it seems, is essential to any system of morals worth the name. It is not just a unique feature of Kant's ethical theory, though Kant has very ably explicated the concept and has emphasized its central importance in ethics. Disinterestedness is primarily contrasted with self-interest or natural propensities. It is not sheer indifference, aimlessness or lack of all interest. It consists in rising above selfishness or narrow self-interest. It does not necessarily involve Kantian ethical presuppositions. It is quite possible for Kantians as well as non-Kantians, theists and atheists, capitalists and communists, hedonists, utilitarians and others to be disinterested in this sense. There is no logical absurdity in the concept of disinterested performance of duty. Nor is there any convincing reason to believe that such actions are psychologically impossible. Unselfishness or self-sacrifice is a quite possible thing. But is it possible to prove in any specific instance that disinterested dutiful action has been performed? Of course, the question of rigorous demonstration, as in formal logic or pure mathematics, does not arise here. However, a lingering doubt may always persist in critical minds about the purity of the motive of an action, for motives often lie hidden in unconscious depths of minds. But such theoretical uncertainties which it is impossible to dispel need not cause much worry in matters of practice. If it is possible to do one's duty disinterestedly, then what is important in morality is that one should carefully strive to accomplish this to the best of one's ability—no matter whether it is capable of proof or not.

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#### NOTES

1. Kant : *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (Trans. by H. J. Paton), 1962, p. 68.