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### Kant's Ethical Theory

Immanuel Kant was a giant of European philosophy. Onora O'Neill points out that Kant is often considered one of the most important philosophers since ancient times. His works have had such a tremendous impact that they are still being investigated today. Kant came up with theories that were radically different than the other ideas being considered during his time. The categorical imperative stands out as one of the major concepts in the development of ethical theory. Kant's ethics are based on the idea that moral duty follows from reason.

To begin to understand Kant's ethical theory, it is important to get a sense of the context of his life. Stumpf and Fieser explain that Kant lived his entire life (1724-1804) in Königsberg in East Prussia. He grew up without much money and lived fairly simply without a very exciting personal life. His parents raised Kant among Pietists, a strict religious sect that influenced Kant's thoughts and works. Kant began to attend the University of Königsberg in 1740, where he studied such subjects as the classics, physics, and philosophy. His education here was largely influenced by the teachings of Continental rationalism that was prevalent during the time of the Enlightenment and by Newtonian physics. After some time working as a tutor, Kant took over a position at the university and began to settle into writing his major works.

Kant's main ideas about moral philosophy can be found in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1787), and *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). Stumpf and Fieser indicate that each of these writings was derived from the philosophy developed in Kant's main work, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant laid out his critical philosophy, which was Kant's answer to some of the issues he saw in the two prominent epistemological theories of the time: Continental rationalism and British empiricism. Rationalism said that all concepts could be developed from human reason, while empiricism said that all knowledge comes from experience. Kant had a unique approach that he believed incorporated worthy aspects of both philosophies. The idea behind the critical philosophy is that not all knowledge comes from things that can be sensed. This a priori knowledge is something that rational beings simply have without arriving at it from experience. They are concepts that our minds possess and that shape our experiences. Causality and space and time are examples of a priori knowledge. The critical philosophy had a strong influence on Kant's moral theory.

Kant argues in *Groundwork* that the goal of moral philosophy should be to determine how humans are able to arrive at common moral principles that should apply to everyone (Stumpf and Fieser). Kant explains that just as we can determine that one physical event leads to another in the physical world by using the concept of causality in theoretical reason, we can establish how a person should behave through practical reason. There are a priori concepts such as duty and obligation that determine what moral actions people should take. Because these concepts are a priori, they are known to all humans without any experience required to know them. When considering an action, people should always ask what he or she ought to do (O'Neill). The person can use practical reason to determine whether or not they should do an action based on a priori concepts. For Kant, morality is then the laws of behavior we apply to all people that can be arrived at through reason.

Kant goes on to say that the only thing that can be considered good without qualification is a good will. Matt McCormick explains that a good will is good because it is good in itself,

regardless of the outcomes of the willing person's actions. A good action is one in which the willing person acts with duty to a moral law in mind. Kant believes that the consequences of an action do not matter. Instead, it is the motive of the person doing the action that matters. Interestingly, Kant takes this so far as to say that it is never okay to lie even if someone's life is in danger because this would be violating a moral law (Hinman). The moral laws are then commands that people must follow (Stumpf & Fieser). People arrive at these moral imperatives through reason. These actions must be done without any other end in mind. Kant calls the commands that we must follow out of a sense of duty the categorical imperative.

Kant writes the categorical imperative in three ways. The first formulation of the categorical imperative is "Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Stumpf & Fieser 287). A maxim is a sort of code to live by which has some motivation behind it. Green takes this to mean that people should act in a way that is capable of becoming a universal law and that they would want everyone to follow. As a good example, take someone who makes a lying promise. This is morally forbidden under the categorical imperative because it is not possible for the person to will it to become a universal law of nature. If everyone decided to make lying promises then there would be no trust and a promise would have no value so that lying promises would not convince anyone or accomplish anything. This example suggests that we should treat people with respect.

The second formulation of the categorical imperative is based on the intrinsic worth of humans. It is stated as follows: "Act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only" (Stumpf & Fieser 288). Green explains that treating someone as a mere means is using them as a tool to accomplish some other goal that doesn't take consider their human value. However, it is fine to use someone as a means as long as you keep them in mind as rational beings and treat them with respect or as an ends. You must keep the person in mind as having worth that is not more important than your own.

The third formulation can be derived from the first two formulations. It indicates that people should "always so act that the will could regard itself as making universal law through its own maxim" (Stumpf & Fieser 289). Stumpf and Fieser explain that we must act as if we are in direct control of what actions we want to be considered moral law. This deals with the idea that the will is autonomous. An autonomous will is one that is free from being controlled by someone or something other than the self. In Kant's mind, to be free means that one is not being controlled by anything and only has the duty to follow a moral code.

It is important to note that even though much criticism arose in response to Kant's ethical theories, his works still resonate today. O'Neill suggests that most of ethical theories today must take Kant's ethics into account to either refute or build off of. His ideas lead directly to the German idealism movement that followed. Kant's concept of universal moral laws without preference is one of the most influential in ethical theory.

### Works Cited

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