

The Human In Kant's Moral Philosophy

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Abstract:

This study aims to explore the dimensions of Kantian thought regarding humans and ethics, examining the relationship between humans and the moral framework presented by Kant. It highlights the foundations upon which Kant built his system of moral philosophy, such as human free will, the moral law, and the concept of the human as an end in itself. Humanity is considered the cornerstone of philosophical thought, as it is the only being endowed with reasoning, perception, and knowledge. For this reason, Kant's moral philosophy is fundamentally centered on humanity.

Keywords: Human, Ethics, Kant, Free Will, Moral Duty, Pure Reason.

Introduction:

The ethical problem represents the essence of philosophy, as it intersects both theoretical and practical domains and is closely tied to humans and their existential being. The topic of humans and ethics was a pivotal issue in the philosophy of Kant (1724–1804), where humanity is intricately linked to moral duty. In this framework, the human being is a rational and free entity capable of shaping their free will according to absolute moral principles. These principles transcend personal utility and are based solely on moral duty for its own sake.

Kantian ethics does not require religion as much as it requires the concept of humanity and its relation to ethics. It is founded on the principle of human free will. As a rational being, the human has the ability to choose their actions, which makes them morally responsible for those actions.

From this perspective, we pose the general question: How can a human being endowed with free will be bound by absolute moral laws? And does moral duty lead a person to complete goodness or happiness?

1. Kant's Transition from Theoretical Reason to Practical Reason:

Kant's transition from theoretical reason to practical reason was the result of his method, which led him to move toward the practical aspect of his philosophical system, namely, from the theoretical realm to the practical realm of ethics. While Kant's affirmation of the existence of the world in itself paved the way for discussing the possibility of the existence of (God, freedom, and the immortality of the soul), he could not accept the necessary practical use of reason unless he simultaneously denied speculative reason its claims to excessive visions. Therefore, after science, he found it necessary to "make room for faith"³. This statement by Kant does not mean the negation of science in favor of faith, nor does it imply doubt about the objective value of science. Instead, it reflects his desire to separate science from faith⁴.

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3) Kant, "Critique of Pure Reason," translated by Mousa Wahba, Center for National Development, 1st edition, Lebanon, p. 38

4) Zakaria Ibrahim, "Kant or the Critical Philosophy," Dar Misr for Printing, 2nd edition, Cairo, 1972,

While theoretical reason failed to provide proofs for the existence of an absolute world or to establish transcendent matters beyond the sensory realm, belief in the existence of (God, freedom, and the immortality of the soul) remains "imposed beliefs required by the motives of proper morality⁵."

Thus, Kant neither sacrificed science for the sake of ethics nor the other way around. Instead, he maintained a clear distinction between science and ethics, ensuring that neither encroached upon the other's domain, as each possesses its autonomy and specific boundaries. In this context, Kant stated in his Critique of Judgment: "Every science must have its defined place in the encyclopedia of sciences. If it is a philosophical science, it must be given a position either in the theoretical or the practical part⁶."

Kant, as both a scientist and a moral philosopher, consistently believed in the vital importance of both science and ethics as distinct yet complementary aspects of human intellectual activity. What matters, as he emphasized, is "not to view the truths of science through the eyes of a moral philosopher, nor to view the truths of ethics through the eyes of a scientist⁷." The various aspects of his critical philosophy form a coherent, interconnected, and integrated philosophical project, representing a unified, consistent system, often referred to as systematic philosophy.

Evidence of this coherence lies in his Critique of Practical Reason, where he asserts that all the steps he took with pure reason, even in its practical application, align closely and directly with the fundamental points of the Critique of Pure Reason. It is as if he intentionally and deliberately crafted each step to affirm and reinforce this consistency.

At the root of this lies Kant's belief that reason, though singular in nature, has two distinct uses⁸: one theoretical and the other practical. As mentioned earlier, what is permissible for one use may not apply to the other. According to Kant, humans do not need scientific knowledge to understand what they ought to do to be honest and good, or to be wise and virtuous. The knowledge of what one should do, and consequently what one should know, must be accessible to everyone, even the most ordinary individuals⁹.

Given that one can transition from the actual to the possible, and from the possible to the actual, the duality established by Kant ultimately stems from the distinction between theory and practice¹⁰. Theoretical knowledge, in Kant's view, pertains to what is, while practical knowledge concerns what ought to be.

Kant's deep sense of the insufficiency of theoretical knowledge is rooted in his view that all of reason's endeavors in practice revolve around three key issues: (God, freedom, and immortality). The ultimate aim of these problems lies in what must be done. When discussing human conduct concerning the ultimate goal, the wise and purposeful organization of human reason by nature aims only at what is ethical.

It is not possible to determine Kant's ethical doctrine from a single work, as this doctrine is composed of several foundational elements, including Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785), Critique of Practical Reason (1788), and The Metaphysics of Morals (1797). The task of the Metaphysics of Morals, therefore, is to establish the existence of a pure practical reason or, in other words, to study the a priori elements underlying our moral rules.¹¹

p. 22.

5) Mahmoud Zidan, "Kant: His Theoretical Philosophy," previous reference, p. 10

6) Kant, "Critique of the Power of Judgment," translated by Ghanem Hanna, Arab Organization for Translation and Distribution, Center for Studies of Arab Unity, 1st edition, Beirut, 2005, p. 373.

7) Kant, "Critique of the Power of Judgment," previous reference, p. 29

8) Abdel Rahman Badawi, "Ethics in Kant," Printing Agency, without edition, Kuwait, 1979, p. 145

9) Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," translated by Abdel Ghaffar Makiwi, National Printing and Publishing House, without edition, 1965, p. 33.

10) Othman Amin, "Pioneers of Idealism in Western Philosophy," Dar Al-Thaqafa for Printing and Publishing, 2nd edition, Cairo, 1975, p. 122

Just as reason plays a role and holds significance in understanding objects in the Critique of Pure Reason, it also plays a role in ethics. While the practical use of reason was briefly addressed toward the end of the Critique of Pure Reason, it received more extensive and precise development in the Critique of Practical Reason.¹²

For Kant, the term "practical" refers to that which relies on the free activity of reason. Thus, in his exploration of ethics, Kant excluded anything empirical, i.e., anything related to our observations of people's behavior in practical life. Instead, he focused solely on what is a priori. Consequently, the *Metaphysics of Morals* deals with the a priori foundations and principles of human moral actions.¹³

2. Humanity and Moral Freedom:

Freedom refers to the unique faculty that distinguishes a rational being, enabling them to express their own will through their actions. Freedom is defined as the absence of external coercion, and a free person is one who is neither a slave nor a captive. Philosophically, freedom is understood as: "The choice to act after deliberation, with the ability to refrain from that action or to choose its opposite¹⁴."

The moral philosopher, by duty, must illuminate the path to human freedom. Kant regarded the path of freedom as the only road where humans can use their reason in all their actions and omissions. For this reason, even the most precise philosophies and the most ignorant minds cannot dispute the essential truth of freedom.¹⁵ For Kant, "reason is the constant condition of all voluntary actions in which a human manifest themselves¹⁶." Kantian freedom is spontaneity or "the ability to act according to internal principles independent of any external influences¹⁷."

The will is described as practical, as the term "theoretical" relates to perception, while the term "practical" relates to action or behavior¹⁸. Thus, the primary question of practical reason is: What should we do, or how should we behave?

The will is purely animalistic when it is determined solely by sensory motives, that is, when it is driven by impulses. However, the will that is determined independently of such motives, and by incentives conceivable only through reason, is called free will. Everything connected to this free will, whether as a principle or a result, is deemed practical.¹⁹

According to Kant, every human being can act only under the influence of the idea of freedom. From a practical standpoint, humans are genuinely free, and thus, freedom must be assumed as a defining attribute of the will of all rational beings.

For Kant, freedom is the key to understanding the autonomy of the will. If human actions are preceded by causes in time and yet are described as free, it is because these causes are ideas created by our own faculties as sources of desires. Thus, humans act according to their own inclinations.

11) Bertrand Russell, "History of Western Philosophy, Modern Philosophy (Vol. 3)," translated by Mohamed Fathy Al-Shinety, Egyptian General Book Organization, Cairo, Egypt, 1977, p. 323.

12) Mahmoud Zidan, "Kant: His Theoretical Philosophy," p. 349.

13) Zakaria Ibrahim, "The Problem of Freedom," Dar Misr for Printing, without edition, Cairo, Egypt, p. 18.

14) Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," previous reference, p. 121.

15) Kant, "Critique of Pure Reason," previous reference, p. 281.

16) Mahmoud Said Ahmed, "The Concept of Teleology in Kant," Dar Al-Thaqafa for Publishing and Distribution, without edition, Cairo, 1988, p. 72.

17) Bertrand Russell, "History of Western Philosophy, Modern Philosophy (Vol. 2)," translated by Mohamed Fathy Al-Shinety, Egyptian General Book Organization, Cairo, Egypt, 1977, p. 165.

18) Kant, "Critique of Pure Reason," previous reference, p. 384.

Furthermore, the moral law, a cornerstone of Kantian ethics, represents nothing other than the autonomy of pure practical reason—that is, freedom. This is why the principle of the autonomy of human will is central to elevating human dignity in the ethics of critical philosophy.

A person feels free when their actions are motivated by duty determined by an absolute moral law. Consequently, in Kant's view, every will subjected to duty becomes a good will. In Kantian terms, the good will corresponds to the concepts of character or disposition²⁰. What is essential in the moral value of actions is that the moral law must directly determine the will. The good will, as Kant defines it, summarizes all the moral qualities that humans value above others when judging the true moral worth of meanings and human actions.²¹ Every moral action and feeling presupposes freedom in humans, and Kant's belief in this freedom is understood as a necessary condition for the existence of duty. Thus, Kant's ethical philosophy transitions from the concept of ability to that of obligation. For this reason, freedom can be regarded as the cornerstone of Kant's moral philosophy²². Finally, the freedom enjoyed by the will requires, according to Kant, the acknowledgment of two postulates of practical reason: the immortality of the soul and the existence of God.

3. Humanity and Moral Duty:

If there is a clear transition from freedom to duty, this transition becomes evident when we understand the implications of Kant's moral law. It is through the moral law alone that we come to know we are free. The substance of the moral law is founded on the feeling that compels us to work for the good of one's character and its growth.

This feeling becomes apparent when we attempt to apply freedom to the moral self. Without freedom, it would be impossible to trace the influence of the moral law within ourselves. The moral law not only requires justification in terms of the possibility of freedom but also proof that it genuinely applies to beings who recognize this law as binding upon themselves. The moral law, then, is essentially a law of freedom. It states that a moral agent acts ethically if reason governs all their inclinations and aligns their actions accordingly with a law that has no exceptions and applies universally²³. In Kant's view, "pure reason is practical in itself" and provides humanity with a universal law, which we refer to as the moral law.²⁴ From this perspective, Kant defines human behavior from the top down by the moral rule, not from the bottom up by the social conditions of behavior²⁵. Since the essence of morality is to liberate individuals from their subjectivity to give their actions a universally applicable form, "the concept of freedom thus acquires an objective reality²⁶."

19) Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," previous reference, p. 17.

20) Émile Butor, "Kant's Philosophy," translated by Othman Amin, Egyptian General Organization for Publishing, without edition, Cairo, 1971, p. 312.

21) Mohamed Abdel Rahman Bissar, "Reflections on Modern and Contemporary Philosophy," Al-Maktabah Al-Asriyah Publications, 2nd edition, Beirut, Lebanon, 1972, p. 150.

22) Abdel Rahman Badawi, "Ethics in Kant," previous reference, p. 58.

23) Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason," translated by Ahmed Al-Shibani, Dar Al-Yaqza Al-Arabiya for Writing, Translation, and Publishing, Beirut, 1966, p. 64.

24) Hassan Hanafi, "Religion Within the Limits of Pure Reason According to Kant," Dar Al-Fikr Al-Arabi, Cairo, without date, p. 143.

25) Gilles Deleuze, "Kant's Critical Philosophy," translated by Osama Al-Hajj, University Press for Studies, Publishing, and Distribution, 1st edition, Beirut, 1997, p. 49.

26) Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason," previous reference, p. 85.

27) Gilles Deleuze, "Kant's Critical Philosophy," previous reference, p. 59.

28) Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason," previous reference, p. 146.

29) Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," previous reference, p. 24.

30) Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason," previous reference, p. 133.

31) André Chrisson, "The Ethical Problem and Philosophers," translated by Abdel Halim Mahmoud, Dar Al-Rashad, Cairo, 2004, p. 287.

Every human being must acknowledge the existence of a law intended to be a moral law—a rule of obligation that necessarily carries the mark of absolute necessity.

If it is always good for a person to base their moral judgment on a well-structured method, then they should adopt the following principle: "**Act always in such a way that the inspiration of your will could be made a universal law, akin to the general laws of nature**"²⁷. For this reason, "the moral law must address a common moral sense"²⁸.

At this point, the imagination will form part of this moral sense. With the law Kant advocates, the following commandment becomes feasible: "**Love God above all else, and love your neighbor as yourself.**"²⁹ This commandment necessitates respect for a law that commands love, not leaving it to arbitrary choice to become a guiding principle for us.

Kant provides the example of the duty of beneficence. Beneficence, wherever a person is capable of it, is a duty. Some individuals possess such profound compassion that they derive inner pleasure from spreading joy and delight in others' satisfaction, as long as such actions stem from their own will, free from vanity or self-serving motives.³⁰

The moral law completely sets aside the influence of self-love and endlessly suppresses arrogance. If such suppression feels humiliating in our judgment, the law undoubtedly humbles every person by exposing how their physical inclinations compare to this law.³¹

This law, which is binding for humanity and directly dictated by reason, stands in direct opposition to the inclination or desire aimed at personal happiness and enjoyment. It represents a law of our rational existence, a form of self-regulation, an internal, autonomous legislation. Thus, the moral law, while being fundamentally rational, is devoid of any utilitarian consideration³².

Due to the sanctity of this Kantian law, and given humanity's inherent lack of sanctity, we must regard humanity in ourselves as an end³³. If someone chooses a means, it is because only humans, as rational beings, are ends in themselves. Rational beings are called persons because their rational nature makes them ends in themselves, meaning they cannot be used merely as means. Therefore, rational nature exists as an end in itself. In this sense, humanity necessarily perceives its own existence, and this principle becomes a subjective foundation for human actions.

In general, humans are not objects and cannot be treated as mere means. Consequently, in all actions, they must always be regarded as ends in themselves. From this, Kant formulates the following moral law: "**Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.**"³⁴

In this sense, humanity must be sacred within ourselves, as the human being is the subject of the moral law. Therefore, Kantian law leads to the consideration of humanity as the ultimate purpose of nature.

Humanity, in its relationship to the moral law, represents a duty or obligation as long as it is indeed a member of a moral kingdom made possible by freedom and presented by reason

32) Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason," previous reference, p. 153.

33) Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," previous reference, p. 73.

34) Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," previous reference, p. 2734) Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," previous reference, p. 27

as an object of respect. In this regard, Kant emphasizes that the moral stage on which humanity stands is the respect for the authority of the moral law. The disposition that humans must possess to obey this law should be rooted in duty, not in spontaneous inclination.

4. The Concept of Duty:

Kant defines the concept of duty as: "The necessity of performing an act out of respect for the moral law ³⁵", meaning that it implies a general obligation. "Duty is the majestic and formidable name, containing nothing enticing or charming, but only demanding submission and requiring compliance. It does not aim to move the will through threats or instill fear but simply declares or presents a law that finds its way into minds on its own, yet still commands a hesitant reverence³⁶«.

Kant thus clarifies that "the concept of duty requires the action to be objective, i.e., consistent with the law, so that the individual's feeling is based on their awareness that they have acted in accordance with duty and out of duty, i.e., out of respect for the law."

This connection between duty and the moral law led Kant to derive a set of rules for conduct that form the fundamental pillars of his moral philosophy. These rules are: ³⁷

1. "Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature."
2. "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."
3. "The principle of every human will, as a will legislating universally through all its maxims."

Moreover, in duty, we find the reinforcement of the foundations of freedom. As long as we feel within ourselves the law of duty, we must be free; otherwise, we would not be able to align with that law. However, it is not sufficient for a person's behavior to be characterized by freedom and respect to describe that behavior as conforming to the law of duty or to establish it as morally correct, unless that person is fully aware of what that law requires.

According to Kant, the moral principle is the principle of duty, meaning the principle based on duty. Human actions carry no moral value ³⁸ if the behavior of individuals lacks this principle. Kant adds in this regard that if there were no actions aligned with what duty commands, this would not prevent doubt about whether such actions truly arose from a sense of duty and whether they contained moral value.³⁹

If humans are the only beings who act according to duty, the value of Kantian duty lies

35) Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason," previous reference, p. 152.

36) Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," previous reference, p. 77.

37) Zakaria Ibrahim, "Kant or the Critical Philosophy," previous reference, p. 175.

38) Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," previous reference, p. 39.

39) Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason," previous reference, p. 256.

40) Zakaria Ibrahim, "Kant or the Critical Philosophy," previous reference, p. 179.

41) François Grégoire, "The Major Metaphysical Problems," Dar Maktabat Al-Hayat Publications, Beirut, p. 125.

42) Mohamed Abdel Rahman Bissar, "Reflections on Modern and Contemporary Philosophy," previous reference, p. 174.

43) Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason," previous reference, p. 73.

inherently within duty itself, regardless of any benefit, gain, or material advantage. "A person needs only a little reflection to always find themselves indebted to humanity, as such reflection would eliminate the illusion that permits the suppression of the concept of duty"⁴⁰.

And if Kant called for love for others, and most of our actions align with duty, this categorical imperative, that is, duty, often requires self-denial. A person does not need to be an enemy of virtue but merely an objective observer.

"There is no place for desires, inclinations, or material aims in adhering to the idea of duty"⁴¹. Duty categorically commands us to act without regard for our interests or selfishness. It is an obligation to act, an imposition, a categorical, absolute, and decisive command. The rational mind, which is uniform in all human beings, issues such a command, as reason directs action.

Thus, Kant believed that humanity itself cannot dispense with the concept of duty. The concept of duty, as a moral guide and the foundation of ethics, inherently calls for the reality of a supreme being who governs through reward and punishment. If this duty, for humans, is a divine commandment, then every divine commandment must inherently be a human duty⁴².

Moreover, it is psychologically impossible for a human being to perform an action without finding resonance for it within themselves. Practical reason relies on innate, a priori foundations for its understanding of truths, making it an internal force within the human being. Kant referred to this as conscience. Consequently, we must conceive of conscience as an overseer—⁴³a subjective principle of accountability that brings humans before God. Thus, conscience serves as a source of warning before making decisions.

5. The Human and Happiness or the Greatest Good:

Kant's philosophy is essentially centered around an important question aimed at searching for human goals and what they seek in terms of good and freedom by following the law of duty. When a person faces the totality of the commands of duty, they simultaneously feel a strong resistance, which is embodied in their needs and inclinations, all of which can be summarized in the word happiness. However, it is impossible for a person to base their happiness on mere metaphysical assumption. Thus, Kant believes that while every human being can obey an ethical command and fulfill its requirements, it is entirely impossible for every person to satisfy the conditional moral law of happiness.⁴⁴

Happiness cannot be the cause of virtue, because the moral law is the only principle that determines good will, and virtue seems to be no more than the cause of happiness. This is because the laws of the sensible world do not align with the intentions of good will. A person who is solely concerned with enjoying life directs their question only to the amount of pleasure and its intensity, whether the source of that pleasure is their thought or senses. Whenever enlightened reason focuses on gaining enjoyment in life and happiness, the person moves further away from true contentment.⁴⁵

If happiness were the ultimate goal of human existence, reason would merely be an obstacle in its achievement, because instinctual desires are better equipped to attain happiness than reason. Happiness is not the absolute value by which we measure things, nor is it the ultimate purpose of our existence, as that would make our existence merely pleasurable. Kant says, "Happiness is the state of a rational being in a world where everything happens according to that being's wishes and will"⁴⁶.

44) Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," p. 20.

45) Kant, "Critique of Practical Reason," previous reference, p. 213.

46) Abdel Rahman Badawi, "Ethics in Kant," p. 109.

Every rational being desires to be happy according to its mortal nature, as it has needs. These needs relate to our desire faculties, that is, something connected to the feeling of pleasure or pain. It is the individual's feeling of pleasure and pain that determines where a person should place their happiness. This will differ even within the same person, depending on their needs, as this feeling changes⁴⁷.

While it is essential to recognize that every human being hopes for happiness in proportion to how deserving they are according to their behavior, we find that the moral system is inseparable from the system of happiness. This is because the realization of moral good assumes an agreement between its sensible nature according to its laws and the supra-sensible nature according to its law, and this agreement appears in the idea of the proportionality between happiness and morality, i.e., the idea of the highest or greatest good⁴⁸.

The Kantian moral law requires justice, meaning happiness proportional to virtue, and only divine providence can guarantee this justice, as long as life exists. Therefore, there is (freedom, life to come, and God), without which there can be no such thing as virtue.

If our minds allow us to believe that behind things is a God, our moral sense commands us to believe in it, and faith alone is what allows for the freedom of will. It is also what provides human existence the opportunity to deserve happiness through the achievement of virtue⁴⁹.

Conclusion:

What we conclude is that, in Kant's philosophy, man is subject to a moral law issued by his pure reason. Since Kant's ethics is, for man, a shared or social morality, it always looks at the human being in terms of his relationship with others, and it also contains a purely social spirit in the predominance of altruism over selfishness in the two principles: "Act in such a way that your action is an end in itself, not a means," and "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means." Similarly, Kant's principle that the individual should be treated as an end in himself.

In general, man does not need a higher or superior being to know his duty; the moral law itself is the guardian of man, because Kantian ethics acquires its subjective quality through pure practical reason.

The moral act derives its value from the free will of the human being and his autonomous mind. Thus, the moral experience becomes the creation of reason, meaning practical reason, and the moral issue becomes the reason that manifests itself within the sphere of practical sensory life and reveals true subjectivity.

Kant, therefore, moved humanity from absolute necessity to responsible free will or pure freedom, making reason and will in man one and the same—freedom—thus preparing the human will to transcend from the world of appearances to the world of essences and things-in-themselves.

Kant believes that every rule of behavior allows the individual to live freely while respecting the freedom of others. Respecting the freedom of others is a right. Hence, Kant sees law as a necessary transition phase to a philosophy of justice, which is grounded in ethics and the human rights of the individual. Limited freedom is a legitimate right, and freedom cannot exist without law, nor can a civil society exist without a state, nor peace without coercion. Dignity is a human right imposed on others, and expressing thoughts and opinions is a fundamental human right that reflects the moral duty within us. Kant emphasizes the importance of practical ethics, which depend on reason rather than

47) Gilles Deleuze, "Kant's Critical Philosophy," pp. 69, 68.

48) Zakaria Ibrahim, "Kant or the Critical Philosophy," previous reference, p. 215.

emotions. The human being is obliged to follow the moral duty, and according to Kant, a person enjoys a degree of freedom and responsible choice in his actions, and freedom is a prerequisite for achieving human self-realization.

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