

Duty – The Moral Worth of Action

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1. Introduction

As human beings living in society, we perform two very important roles- one is that of a social agent and the other is that of a moral agent. As social agents our roles are more or less prescribed to us by the society and we know that we have to act within some parameters that lie external to us. For example, as teachers we all know how we have to conduct ourselves in the class but we are also aware what the students and the institution expect from us in terms of our teaching methodologies, punctuality, course completion, promotion criteria and all other aspects that come with this package. We therefore ensure that all these external parameters are factored in when we are operating as teachers which is one among the many social roles that we play. On the other hand, as moral agents, the parameters of our actions and the way we conduct ourselves lie essentially within us. For example if we have to make a choice between providing a pair of branded shoes to our child, who already has two or more pairs of other branded shoes, and paying the school fees for our maid's child for the first semester which is the same as the price of the shoe, then as social agents it will not be wrong or unjustified to buy a new pair of shoes for our child but our morality motivates us to first pay the fees of the maid's child and then fulfill our child's desire.

Thus consciously or unconsciously we keep playing the roles of a social and moral agent in our day to day lives and act accordingly. There is no separate or demarcated space and time for us to act as social and moral agents. These roles overlap one another and we constantly perform them. In other words our life is full of action and rightly so because as in the Gita the nature around us is so active that we have no choice but to keep ourselves equally active.

But then, it is not just enough to perform actions. There is a constant need to evaluate these actions in order to judge how efficiently we act as social and moral agents. Therefore the process of evaluation begins as soon as we have acted. We evaluate others and likewise others evaluate us on the basis of our conduct and deeds.

We are very quick to approve or disapprove a particular action by using our own standards or ideals, and our conducts also receive a similar treatment. These standards differ from individual to individual and also from society to society. Thus what is liked by me need not be appreciated by others and what is practiced by one society may be completely discarded by any other society. So evaluation is a natural phenomenon that surrounds us and because of the evaluation process the element of morality gets connected with our actions. We express our approval or disapproval towards a particular action by using terms like ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’, ‘wrong’ etc. These terms are moral terms precisely because their use presuppose a reference to some standard or principle which is a – priori and not given in experience.

Since most of our actions as social and moral agents are assessed in this manner, they fall under the category of moral actions and the judgments we make about them are moral judgments. But not all actions are moral actions. We also perform some non moral actions which do not need any kind of assessment. These constitute, for example, the physiological processes that take place inside our body, our reflex actions, instinctive actions and so on. Such actions are automatic and moral judgments are not applicable to them as they are not categorized in terms of being ‘good, ‘bad’ and so on.

From the above distinction between moral and non moral actions it follows that all our voluntary actions or willed actions that we perform consciously, with full responsibility, by using our choices of standards and in total awareness of their consequences, constitute, the subject matter of moral actions.

From an ethical point of view, only such actions are called “conducts” as they reflect a “complete system of definitely willed actions corresponding to the character of man”¹. It is in this sense that non moral actions take a departure from the realm of conducts.

It therefore follows that there is a strong connection between our conduct and our will. In fact if we have to judge the moral worth of our actions, it should be done with reference to what we will and how we will when we act. This is because as human beings we get easily tempted by

our desires, inclinations and self interests and on occasions these factors become so predominant that our will is affected by them.

Cheating innocent people by selling fake medicines or by selling adulterated food items for earning fast buck shows how our will gets molded by our desires and temptations. Such actions lack moral worth and are condemned firstly because they are executed by keeping some ends in mind and secondly because they cost the lives of our fellow beings. Considering all such instances of wrong practices in mind that are increasing around us at an alarming rate, I have made an attempt to show that if we train our will to act from a sense of duty then our actions or conducts will have some moral worth. But this would also require us to ‘will’ what is good. Thus having a good will seems necessary to act from a sense of duty.

The connection between “good will” and “duty” is very well explained by Immanuel Kant in his book entitled *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*. The following sections deal with these issues separately. I shall first deliberate on Kant’s good will and then his concept of duty and then conclude.

2. What is Good Will?

Good will implies willing what is good and in the moral context, it means to will what is morally good. Kant defines good will as the only thing that is “good without qualification”². This means that a good will is good not because of one reason or the other or its consequences or what it brings about. It means it is “good in itself” or it is unconditionally good. A good will is therefore unaffected by our desires, or inclinations or any such factors. Such a will, Kant emphasizes is therefore the one which shines in its own light i.e. it is self illuminating. Thus it is stated that in few cases where good will fails to produce the desired result, its value or goodness continues to remain for a long time. To use Kant’s words, as quoted by Balbir Singh “If with its greatest efforts the good will should yet achieve nothing, and there should remain only the good will then like a jewel, it would still shine by its own light as a thing which has its whole value in itself.”³

It thus follows that goodness of will is not relative upon its consequences. Therefore good will is something that Kant esteems to be higher than the basic human tendencies because the latter make our ‘will’ conditional by subjecting it to some ends in view. But how does one nurture such a will? For this Kant puts the entire responsibility on our reasoning faculty. He says

that just as every mean is adapted to a certain end, similarly our reason is also adapted to producing or facilitating the production of a will which is not only good as a means to an end but which is 'good-in-itself'. This is because it is only our reason which is capable of making choices and helps us in distinguishing the right from the wrong or the correct from the incorrect. Accordingly we use it not only to attain our own happy ends that are conditional ends but also in acquiring the unconditional good will. Here a question arises, namely, how we can demonstrate such a will? It is neither manifested in and through our desires nor through our selfish interests nor even through our inclinations as they all cater to some end results or the other. Therefore in order to demonstrate that there is a good will Kant brings in the notion of duty. He tries to show that we can exercise our good will if we understand our actions as duties and perform them simply as duties.

3. WHAT IS DUTY

Kant explains that we ought to perform our actions exclusively for the sake of duty and not by prioritizing the ends we normally aim at, while doing an act. This does not mean that he is trying to stop us from aiming at our own happiness. All he wants to convey is that we must have some noble end in mind when we act which should be higher than mere happiness. Consequently he says that we have only an indirect duty when it comes to our own happiness. It seems to follow that Kant has the larger picture of human goodness in mind when he talks about "duty". This primarily consists in every individual displaying a good will which is a relatively noble end as compared to being focused exclusively on our own individual happiness. He therefore tries to highlight the point that an action has moral worth only when it is done for the "sake of duty". There are various ways to support this kind of moral stand as taken by Kant. For instance, in our day to day life we often act out of sympathy and generosity and are appreciated for the same. But such actions need not have any moral worth. This is because we exercise these attitudes when we are comfortably placed financially, emotionally and even otherwise. On the other hand if we display similar attitudes at a time when we are going through a crisis situation in our personal lives where it is impossible to develop such tendencies towards others only then our action would have a moral worth.

Another factor that adds to the moral worth of our action according to Kant is the principles or maxims that we follow when we act from a sense of duty. The maxims may be

subjective or objective depending on the individual's circumstances. But from a moral point of view these ought to be general principles so that every rational or moral agent acts on them even if he is tempted to act otherwise. These principles are not given in our textbooks. These are principles according to which an individual is supposed to act in any given situation. In this context Kant suggests that we must always act on principles that have the potential to become "a universal law" as well. And further he also adds that we should never treat our fellow beings as "means" to our ends. These maxims have a direct link with how one understands one's duties. Thus a duty of a cab driver is primarily to drop his customer to his place of destination regardless of the fact whether the customer is male or female or whether it is daytime or nighttime. If we try to act on such formal principles which are devoid of "all the objects of the faculty of desire"⁴ they make our actions morally worthy actions. In fact these formal principles may also be used as a test when one is tempted to act from his own subjective principle which is accentuated by his personal situations or circumstances. All that one needs to see here is whether the subjective principle is in tune with the formal maxim or contradictory to it.

Lastly a third factor which is extremely important while acting from a sense of duty and makes our action morally worthy is to act out of a "respect for law". In other words we must be as respectful towards our duties as we respect the laws of our land. This is because there is a parallel between law and the duty that motivates us to act in the sense that both command us to obey them. Therefore if we act with respect for our duties then no mundane tendencies can influence our 'will' as it will automatically come under the control of a universal law which is nothing but duty.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to state that Kant's notion of "good will" and his concept of "duty for the sake of duty" demonstrate a reversible relation. On the one hand if we nurture good will it enables us to act from a sense of duty and when we act from a sense of duty we accomplish good will. Therefore both these concepts have direct relevance to human conditions and situations. His idea of duty is certainly formal and law like, but we need this kind of dragging force or a compelling factor while delivering our actions since we have already incurred heavy losses in terms of our lives, health, environment and person to person dealing by acting primarily from our desires and inclinations.

Therefore, if we inculcate in ourselves and in the next generation the habit to act from a sense of duty we may restrict further loss of human values. Although we may not get prompt results by making duty as our standard of action, the sense of duty in us will continue to retain its value.

End Notes

1. Balbir Singh, (1971). *Principles of Ethics*. Delhi: S Nigam &co. pp 45-46
2. .H.J Paton, (1955). *The Moral Law or Kant's Groundwork Of The Metaphysics Of Morals*; London, Hutchinson & co ltd. pp 17.
3. Balbir Singh, (1971). *Principles of Ethics*. Delhi: S Nigam & co. pp 97.
4. H.J.Paton, (1955). *The Moral Law or Kant's Groundwork Of The Metaphysics Of Morals*: London, Hutchinson & co ltd. pp 21.

References

1. Paton, H.J., *The Moral Law or Kant's Groundwork Of The Metaphysic Of Morals*: London, Hutchinson & co ltd.1955.
2. Singh, Balbir., *Principles of Ethics*. Delhi: S Nigam & co 1971.
3. Lillie William, *An Introduction to Ethics*;London,Methuen & co.lid. Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2003
4. Habermas, Jurgen., *Moral consciousness and communicative action*, Translated by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholson,MIT press 2003
5. Hobhouse, L.T.,*Morals in Evolution*, New York, Henryhelt &Company, 1925.