Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) The Good Will and Acting from Duty P. Boaheng

Deontology: Certain types of actions are right or wrong in themselves, quite independently of the value or disvalue of their consequences.

Kant’s Moral Agent: free rational autonomous agent respecting free rational autonomous agents.

Three Central Thoughts of Kant’s Theory
1. All persons are rational agents capable of thinking about the choices they make and of making rational choices.
2. All persons have an infinite worth, in and of themselves, simply in virtue of being persons. Only persons are ends in themselves. Everything else has a conditional value.
3. As persons who are ends-in-themselves, they are themselves the authors of the moral law. They are not slaves to their passions or desires.

Kant: human beings act on Maxims.
Maxim: Rule embodying reasons we are inclined to act on.
Free Will: capacity to act or not to act on a maxim.

Setting up the View: The Good Will and the Moral Law
1. The only thing that is good without qualification is GOOD WILL. (p. 9)
   • Other values, e.g., being happy, smart, nice are conditional on having good will.
2. To have a good will is to act from moral duty alone, not from any further desires
   • The value of good will does not derive from its good effects, i.e., what it accomplishes in the world.
   • It does not matter what actions a person actually performs—it is the intention to do the right thing that matters.
   • Therefore, the key to morality is not pleasure or happiness but rather intentions.

Action done from duty vs. Action done in accordance with duty (p. 13)
Some actions accord with duty, but are not performed for the sake of duty. Action has a moral worth only if it is done from duty, that is, for the sake of duty not merely in accordance with duty. (This is a Key Distinction for Kant)

Moral Grounds vs. Non-Moral Grounds
Moral Grounds: recognition that it is morally required or accords with requirements of morality.
Non-Moral Grounds: inclination, fear, whether from nature or nurture, socialization, subconscious psyche.

If the ground of acting is moral, then you are acting FROM duty, but if the basis or ground is non-moral then it is in accordance with duty.
Conclusion: Action has moral worth only if the ground of acting is a moral one.

**Case 1:** Greg: Gives correct change to children because he recognizes it’s right although he really desires to keep the change. Moral Ground: No accident he does the right thing. He did what he ought to do against his inclination. (Contra Aristotle)

**Schiller’s Objection:** Kant’s moral worth requires always acting contrary to desire. Thus, only a person who is miserable in his duty has any moral worth.  
*Is this a fair Criticism of Kant’s ethical theory?*

Kant: One can like what one does so long as the ultimate ground of one’s doing it is moral. An act is good only if our motivation is to obey duty.

**Case 2:** Elizabeth gives correct change to children because it’s the right thing to do, but also takes pleasure in it.  
*Is the Ground Moral or Non-Moral?*  
Kant: The supporting inclination/pleasure must not constitute the decisive motivation. The only motive should be the sense of duty

**Case 3:** Christina gives correct change just because she feels it’s right. Is the ground Moral or Non-Moral? It depends on ground of the feeling. Doing what you feel like doing without recognition of ethical duty gives your action no moral worth.

**Case 4:** Darren gives correct change because he is benevolent by nature.  
*Does his action have moral worth?* He is motivated to act by benevolence which is not within his control. He doesn’t deserve praise, since it is by accident that he’s benevolent.

**Note:** Kant does not consider actions performed in accordance with duty but not for duty’s sake, immoral. Rather, they are irrelevant to morality. They have no moral status.

**Case 5:** Jared and Mullein got married about 4 years ago. They’re deeply in love with each other and they both have no inclination to cheat on each other.  
*Should their marital fidelity be morally praised?*  
- The principle of fidelity is good because it conforms to the moral law, but neither Jared nor Mullein is acting in a morally praiseworthy fashion.

**Case 6:** Pearce stopped stealing in the past because he feared going to jail.  
- This would be a case of prudence, not morality. Pearce did the “right” thing out of prudence not out of morality. While Pearce is not to be condemned, he is not to be praised morally.

**Conclusion:** We should always act in conformity to duty. But our acts are only praiseworthy when we do them for the sake of duty, rather than for the sake of consequences.