
UNIT 10 IMMANUEL KANT

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10.1 INTRODUCTION

Immanuel Kant was a German philosopher of the late 18th Century (1724 - 1804). He was a professor of philosophy at the University of Königsberg in Prussia. He was a contemporary of Rousseau, Hume and Adam Smith. He was 65 years old at the time of the French Revolution of 1789, which he praised for its republican goals, while criticising it for its use of immoral means.

Kant believed that a political-legal order could be just, only if it pays homage to morality. He wrote:

A true system of politics cannot ... take a single step without first paying tribute to morality.... For all politics must bend the knee before right, although politics may hope in return to arrive, however slowly, at a stage of lasting brilliance.

Accordingly, in his moral and political philosophy, Kant's main concern was with the necessary, universal and critical-rational principles of morality and justice/rightness (*recht*) in German, (which is not to be confused with the notion of individualistic rights). These are to serve as normative standards for justifying or criticising and reconstructing the political organisation of societies at the national and international levels.

Kant's major contribution was his critique of pure reason and epistemology but his political philosophy is also substantially rich and novel. His political theory emphasised the necessity of treating every single person as an end in itself. His famous saying "treat humanity in your person, and in the person of everyone else, always as an end as well as a means, never merely as a mean" enabled him to emphasise the rights of man, rule of law, a good legal procedure and educational opportunities which would enhance human reason and enlightenment.

10.2 REPRESENTATIVE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

We may begin by locating Kant in the long history of moral and political ideas by noting that while his "critical philosophy" was a culmination of the intellectual movement of the European

Enlightenment, it, at the same time, marked a clear departure from its separation of politics from morality. That is, while espousing the Enlightenment's enthronement of human reason (over Divine Will or Law of Nature), Kant took the supreme principle of that very reason to be the Moral Law (to be tested through what he termed as reason's Categorical Imperative) of the freedom, autonomy and equality of every human being as a moral person. By taking the Moral Law or the Categorical Imperative of moral-practical reason as the supreme principle of human reason, he distanced himself from his empiricist and rationalist predecessors and contemporaries.

Kant acknowledged that he was an Enlightenment thinker. He viewed his mature works to be contributions to the ongoing process of Enlightenment. In an article entitled "What is Enlightenment?" (1784), he defined it as the bold and courageous passage of humanity from a condition of intellectual immaturity and mental laziness to the age of reason. He wrote:

Enlightenment is man's leaving his self-caused immaturity. Such immaturity is not caused by the lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination or courage to use one's intelligence without being guided by another [say, by a holy book, a priest or a despotic ruler]. *Sapere Aude!* Have the courage to use your own intelligence! [This] is therefore the motto of the Enlightenment.

Kant hoped to contribute to making the ordinary people become self-aware of the universal, necessary, formal and a *priori* conditions or structures of reason, which are implicitly present as normative ideas in their everyday *thinking* and acting as finite rational beings living in this world. For this new self-awareness, Kant felt that a "Copernican Revolution in Metaphysics" is required. He viewed his own mature works to be exercises in such a philosophical revolution

10.3 KANT'S "COPERNICAN REVOLUTION IN METAPHYSICS"

To his readers, Kant proposed his Copernican-like revolution in philosophy in the following words:

Hitherto it has been assumed that our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics if we suppose that objects must conform to knowledge.

The understanding does not derive its laws from, but prescribes them to, nature.

While the earlier Copernican Revolution in astronomy or, rather, cosmology replaced the earth-centric view of the cosmos with the heliocentric or sun-centric view, Kant's Copernican-like revolution in philosophy placed the human being at the centre of the world of knowledge and action. For Kant, the human being is neither a mere passive recipient of the "impressions" of the natural world nor a mere passive subject in the moral world but an active or creative agent in them.

Kant did agree with the rationalist and empiricist thinkers of the Enlightenment in placing "human nature" or "human reason" rather than the authority of the Church, despotic rulers, custom or tradition at the centre or source of human knowledge and morality. He however felt that the empiricists (e.g. Locke and Hume) reduced human nature to the level of the senses,

instincts, feelings and preferences, whereas the rationalists (e.g. Descartes and Leibniz) narrowed or restricted human reason to an egoistic, monadic or intuitive substance. Kant's transcendental-idealist view of human reason and its universal, formal principles of justice and morality would overcome these limitations.

10.4 TRANSCENDENTAL-IDEALIST VIEW OF HUMAN REASON

Kant's "transcendental idealism" is "idealistic" in that it is ideas-constituted, ideal-oriented (rather than "realist") and critical-reconstructive (rather than traditionalist). These features of his thought are reflected in the titles of many of his books, e.g., *Ideas towards a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1784). By "transcendental" ideas or principles, he means the necessary, universal, formal, *apriori* conditions or structures of the possibility of any knowledge or moral action by rational beings. As finite rational agents, human persons, he says, have not only the faculties or capacities of *sense* and *understanding* but also the faculty of theoretical and moral-practical *reason*. He writes:

Man now finds in himself a faculty by means of which he differentiates himself from all other things, indeed even from himself in so far as he is affected by objects; and that faculty is reason. This, as pure self-activity, is elevated even above the understanding ... with respect to ideas, reason shows itself to be such a pure spontaneity that it far transcends anything which sensibility can provide it,...

The faculty of *understanding* has its *a priori* formal categories or concepts (e.g., space, time and causality), which it imposes on our perceptual experiences to make them understandable. Similarly, the faculty of "practical reason" or "rational will" has its "synthetic *a priori*" principles or laws of the morality and justice/right of our thought and action. He writes:

In the theory of duties, man can and should be represented from the point of view of the property of his capacity for freedom, which is completely supersensible, and so simply from the point of view of his humanity considered as a personality, independently of physical determinations (*homo noumenon*).

As suggested in this passage, the "transcendental idea" or norm of the freedom or autonomy (and equality) of the human person as a moral agent is central to Kant's theory of moral duties or obligations. These ideas, Kant notes, are contained in the Moral Law, which has traditionally been known as the Golden Rule. According to that Rule, what we do to others should be what we would have them do to us,

Kant also felt that the fundamental idea of the Moral Law is contained in Rousseau's concept of the General Will as a will representing the true will of *each* member of the community. In fact, Rousseau's idea of the self-governing capacities of human beings had a great influence on Kant's key idea of the autonomy of the human being as a moral agent.

According to Kant, the basic idea of the Moral Law is this: what makes a maxim of action moral is its universalisability—a universalisability, which implies the normative idea of the freedom/autonomy and equality of *all* human beings as moral agents. By autonomy of the moral agent, Kant means her or his freedom from both external coercion and from being determined internally by passions, appetites, desires, etc. The idea of the autonomy of the moral agent implies the idea of her or his *a priori* moral obligation towards the autonomy of other moral agents. This is a distinctive aspect of Kant's moral and political philosophy.

10.5 FORMULATIONS OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

The *a priori*, **formal**, *normative* idea of the freedom/autonomy and equality of all moral agents, Kant argues, is the "Categorical Imperative" of pure practical reason, which, he maintains, can and should be used to assess or test the morality of our maxims of action. He gives several formulations of the Categorical Imperative, which, in any of its formulations, is, in his view, the supreme principle of pure practical reason or rational will. His three major formulations are presented below.

The first formulation (Universal-Law Formulation) is made from the standpoint of the moral agent. It states:

Act only on that maxim, which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

A variant of the first formulation (which *can* be referred to as the Universal-Law-of-Nature Formulation) reads as follows:

Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.

The second formulation (End-in-Itself Formulation) is made from the standpoint of those who are affected by (or, in other words, those who are the recipients of) our actions. It reads:

So act that you always 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.

The third formulation (Kingdom-of-Ends Formulation) views the *agents* and *their recipients* as forming a moral community of self-legislating moral actors. It states:

All maxims as proceeding from our own making of law ought to harmonise with a possible kingdom of ends as a kingdom of nature.

The Categorical Imperative of practical reason, says Kant, is "categorical" in that it is not hypothetical or conditional to the particular wishes or inclinations of this or that moral agent or cultural community. For Kant, morality is not what produces good for ourselves or for others, but what has to be done as an absolute or categorical duty—a duty arising from the presuppositions or *a priori* (inherent or pre-given) structure of our practical reason or rational will. To act morally, in other words, is to act out of a sense of duty, i.e., out of respect for the Moral Law or the Categorical Imperative, and not out of considerations of self-interest, instrumental rationality (as taught by Hobbes) or the protection of any natural right to private property (as taught by Locke). In this respect, Kant's moral and political philosophy marks a major departure from that of Hobbes and Locke.

10.6 THE UNIVERSAL LAW OF RIGHT (RECHT) OR JUSTICE

As the supreme principle of moral-practical reason, the Categorical Imperative is, according to Kant, valid not only for our "inner world" of thoughts, convictions, motivations, etc. but also

for our "outer or external world" of inter-relationships with other human beings. The world of our external relations with other human beings is, however, a world of unavoidable space-and-time-constraints on our freedom of action. For instance, we cannot all be at the same place or occupy the same piece of land at the same time! Accordingly, the Categorical Imperative of moral-practical reason as applicable to our *external* realm of action contains a law or principle of right (*recht*) or justice for **making my freedom** of external action compatible with everyone else's freedom of external action. Kant writes:

Right is ... the totality of conditions, under which the will of **one** person can be unified with the will of another under a universal law of freedom.

He formulates the Universal Principle of Right (*Recht*) or Justice as follows:

Every action is just **that** in itself or in its maxim is such that the freedom of the will of each can coexist with the freedom of everyone in accordance **with** universal law.

He also gave a variant of the same law as:

[A]ct externally in such a way that the free use of your will is compatible with everyone **according** to a universal law.

This universal law of right (*recht*) or justice is a "juridical law," which, unlike an "ethical law" (which regulates our "inner world" of thoughts, motivations, etc.), **legitimises**, in accordance with the Categorical Imperative, the use of coercion for its implementation. He writes:

[M]y external and rightful *freedom* should be defined as a warrant to obey no external laws except those to which I have been able to give my own consent. Similarly, external and rightful equality within a state is that relationship among citizens whereby no one can put anyone else under a legal **obligation** without **submitting simultaneously** to a law which requires that he can himself be put under the same kind of obligation by the other person.

Kant goes to the extent of saying that his universal principle of justice or right (*recht*) has a conjoint principle, which regards as just the resort to "universal reciprocal coercion with **the** freedom of others."

10.7 PROPERTY, SOCIAL CONTRACT AND THE STATE

As the universal law or principle of external freedom, **right/justice** morally **enables** and **regulates** (even through just or rightful coercive means) the freedom of human **beings** in their external, *spatial relations* with one another. According to Kant, this principle or law yields, or is conjoint with, a "permissive law" or "juridical postulate" of practical reason, which gives to everyone the right of property in any of the things of the world (in accordance with the universal law of right/justice).

In Kant's view, all the non-human things of the world are at the **disposal** of humanity as a whole, **Our** freedom to **own/use** them can be restricted in the light of practical reason's *a priori* formal, universal law of right/justice, to which all positive, juridical laws must conform. Anyone who first occupies or possesses a piece of land, for instance, must be assumed to be doing so *as part* of humanity's "external freedom" in accordance with practical reason's *a priori* formal

law of right. Since the first acquisition of land or things of the world affects the freedom of action of everyone else, its full moral justification cannot rest on a mere unilateral action. According to Kant, therefore, the moral legitimacy of any original appropriation of property remains provisional until it is ratified by a universal agreement of all who are affected by it. Only such a universal agreement of all who are affected by the original appropriations of property can fulfil the requirement of the Universal Principle of Right/Justice! It is towards the realisation of this ideal requirement of universal Right or Justice that Kant offers his "social contract conceptualisation" of the state and of a "pacific union" of states on a global level.

He speaks of the state as "a union of a multitude of men under laws of Right." Describing the social contract as an idea of reason (rather than as an event), i.e. as an analogue of reason's Categorical Imperative, Kant writes:

The act by which people forms itself into a state is the original contract. Properly speaking, the original contract is only the idea of this act, in terms of which alone we can think of the legitimacy of a state. In accordance with the original contract, everyone within people gives up his external freedom in order to take it up again immediately as a member of a commonwealth, that is, of a people considered as a state.

It [The social contract] is in fact merely an idea of reason, which nonetheless has undoubted practical reality; for it can oblige every legislator to frame his laws in such a way that they could have been produced by the united will of a whole nation, and to regard each subject, in so far as he can claim citizenship, as if he had consented with the general will.

The reason or motivation, which Kant gives for the social contract, is different from the reasons given by Hobbes and Locke. The motivations they give is rational self-interest and the fear of violent death (Hobbes) or the natural right to self-preservation and the protection of property rights (Locke). For Kant, the motivation for the contract is to secure a rational right to property, whereby the contractors could, with moral justification, exclude others from access to it, to which they (i.e. the contractors) only had a provisional right in the state of nature. He writes:

From private right in the natural condition there now arises the postulate of public right: In relation to an unavoidable coexistence with others, you should make the transition from the state of nature to a juridical state, i.e., one of distributive justice,

Kant, unlike Hobbes or Locke, thinks of the institution of property as inseparable from the civil state. He writes:

But the state of a legislative, universal and truly united will is the civil state. Therefore, something external can be originally acquired only in conformity with the idea of a civil state, that is, in reference to it and its realisation, though before its reality (since other wise the acquisition occurs only in the civil state).

According to Hobbes, property rights are created by the sovereign state, which is assumed to be independent from property. For Locke, property rights in the state of nature are absolute. They are, so to say, independent from the state, which only has to guarantee and protect those "natural rights." For Kant, there can be no absolute natural rights to property, just as there is no state that is independent from property. Our right to property, says Kant, can only be legitimate or just if it is in accordance with the Universal Principle of Right/Justice. Our

property rights can therefore be only provisional until they are ratified *both* by a civil state *and* by a peaceful confederation of nations/states of the world.

10.8 PERPETUAL PEACE

A distinctive feature of Kant's political philosophy is its cosmopolitanism, globalism or internationalism. He does not separate domestic politics from international politics. Paying tribute to the cosmopolitan character of Kant's political philosophy, Wolfgang Kersting writes:

While Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau were satisfied with overcoming the interpersonal natural condition and allowed the authority of political philosophy to end at the border of the state, Kant took political philosophy beyond the borders of states and saw its foremost object in the "highest political good" ... of a just order of world peace.

Kant believed that for achieving this "highest political good," namely, perpetual peace among the nations/states of the world, we have to overcome not only the "natural condition" (or "state of nature") among individuals within nations or states but also the "natural condition" of anarchy or war-proneness among the states. In fact, he saw these two levels of natural condition to be interrelated.

He maintained that the universal principle of right/justice has to govern not only domestic politics but also international politics. He writes:

Moral-practical reason within us pronounces the following irresistible veto: There shall be no war, either between individual human beings in the state of nature, or between separate states, which, although internally law-governed, still live in a lawless condition in their external relationships with one another. For war is not the way in which anyone should pursue his rights... It can indeed be said that this task of establishing a universal and lasting peace is not just a part of the theory of right within the limits of pure reason, but its entire ultimate purpose.

Kant disapproved of the reduction of global politics to international diplomatic relations of governments. He called for re-conceptualising international society as the global society of mankind.

Kant did admit that there is a distinction between domestic laws and the Law of Nations in that the latter, unlike the former, is concerned both with the relationship of one state to another and with "relationships of individuals in one state to individuals in another and of an individual to another whole state."

According to Kant, as we saw above, what raises the human being above the animal world is one's capacity for action in accordance with the principles of moral-practical reason. This means that man "is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of other people, or even to his own ends, but is to be prized as an end in himself". Hence, when principles of political justice are grounded in moral-practical reason, they will help prevent wars, in which there is the most blatant use of human beings as means to the ends of others. The autonomy principle of moral-practical reason, says Kant, also calls for a "republican" form of government, under which the citizens will not be treated as the mere tools of the sovereigns.

Kant argues that the enlightened or rational individuals know that the hardships of war fall on them, rather than on their rulers, who, in fact, tend to gain from conflicts and wars. He assumes

that all the citizens of all the countries have a common interest in international peace, while the ruling cliques or regimes tend to have an interest in international conflicts and wars. In his view, therefore, the democratisation or republicanisation of governments can contribute to international peace. Since wars bring more dangers and hardships to the ordinary citizens than to their rulers, republican/democratic governments would find it difficult to decide to go to war.

In his essay, *Perpetual Peace* (1795), he wrote that in the interest of perpetual peace, all the nation-states should agree to be guided by three "definitive articles" of peace, namely: i) the states should adopt republican constitutions; ii) republican states should form a "pacific union" or confederation for the prevention of wars; iii) the "pacific union" should make and put into practice a cosmopolitan law to ensure "universal hospitality" towards foreigners and to prevent foreign conquests and plunder.

10.9 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Kant's moral and political philosophy has served as a source of inspiration or point of departure for many later thinkers, notably Hegel and such present-day political philosophers as Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. They feel inspired or provoked by his teachings about human reason and moral personality, the principles of morality and justice, and the type of political institutions (at both national and international levels), which sustain and are sustained by those principles. Kant's ideas on morality and social contract have influenced Rawls' theory of justice. Habermas' "discourse ethics" is indebted to Kant's idea of the universalisability of the norms of morality.

Hegel (who was 34 years old at the time of Kant's death) accepted Kant's transcendental-idealist philosophy and radicalised it by correcting its so-called abstract universalism and empty formalism. Hegel objects to Kant's construction of moral principles in disregard of human feelings, desires, motivations, etc. The Kantian moral agent, Hegel felt, would be unhappy and incapable as agents or actors in this world. Hegel also saw the possible dangers of the abstractly universal norms of morality, e.g. the revolutionary terror of the French revolution. In fact, Hegel wrote in 1795: "From the Kantian system and its highest completion I expect a revolution in Germany." Hegel's criticism, fails to appreciate the *normative-critical* nature of Kant's moral and political philosophy. His emphasis on the end-in-itself nature of the human being as a moral agent cannot be taken to be providing any justification of revolutionary terror.

Kant's political philosophy stands for a distinctive form of liberalism, which stresses a peace-oriented, cosmopolitan political morality that is centred on the notions of the *moral* autonomy and (universal) *moral obligations* of all human beings towards one another both within and across the boundaries of nation-states. This is in contrast to the rights-based, individualistic and utilitarian types of liberalism. This stress on moral obligations or duties in Kant's moral and political philosophy should not be interpreted as any justification of authoritarianism or conservatism. Kant was well aware that the well-off sections of a society would generally be "happier" with doctrines of charity and kindness than with any theory that puts them under the obligations of morality and justice/right (*recht*) towards the poor.

10.10 SUMMARY

Immanuel Kant was a German philosopher of the time of Rousseau, Hume and Adam Smith. His main concern was with the necessary, universal and critical-rational principles of morality and justice/rightness. He agreed with the rationalist and empiricist thinkers of the Enlightenment

in placing "human nature" or "human reason" rather than the authority of the Church, despotic rulers, custom or tradition at the centre or source of human knowledge and morality. He sought to overcome the limitations of both the empiricists and the rationalists by his **transcendental-idealist** view of human reason and its principles of justice and morality. According to Kant, the basic idea of the Moral Law is its **universalisability** which implies the normative idea of the **freedom/autonomy** and equality of all human beings as moral agents and obligation towards the autonomy of other moral agents. To test the morality of our maxims of action, Kant gives several formulations of what he calls 'Categorical Imperatives' of pure practical reason which is not conditional to any particular moral agent or community. The Categorical Imperative of moral-practical reason as applicable to our **external** realm of action contains a law or principle of right or justice (**recht**) for making my freedom of external action compatible with everyone else's freedom of external action. This law applies even to property. The moral legitimacy of any original appropriation of property remains provisional until it is ratified by a **universal** agreement of all who are affected by it. It is towards the realisation of this ideal requirement of universal Right or Justice that Kant offers his "social contract conceptualisation" of the State and of a "pacific union" of states on a global level. The **cosmopolitanism** and internationalism in Kant's philosophy is very distinctive. He took political philosophy beyond the borders of a state and did not separate domestic politics from international politics though he admitted that there is a distinction. In his view democratisation and **republicanism** contributes to international peace.

10.11 EXERCISES

- 1) "A true system of politics cannot...take a single step without first paying tribute to morality". Discuss Immanuel Kant's political ideas on morality.
- 2) Giving examples explain Kant's idea of 'Categorical Imperative'.
- 3) In what way is Immanuel Kant's political philosophy international in character?