

Seyed Mohammad Hossein Mir-Mohammadi

PhD

KANT'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY: DEONTOLOGY OR VIRTUE ETHICS?

The well-known and contemporary reading of Kantian ethics identifies it as a deontological viewpoint which puts emphasis on the concept of duty and those actions done for the sake of Moral Law. Accordingly, the moral actions are only those done for the sake of Moral Law. The possible reason can be traced in Kant's emphasis on "Categorical Imperative" and the concept of "respect to Moral Law". However, this well-known reading of Kantian ethics is not complete. This paper tries to show that although the concept of duty plays an important role in Kantian ethics, the character and the habits of the actor have an important role to play as well. If so, it is possible to hold that Kantian ethics should be considered as a rational-virtue ethics rather than a mere deontological viewpoint.

Key words: deontology, virtue ethics, Categorical Imperative, Moral Law, The character of the actor.

Introduction

Virtue ethics is generally restricted to the philosophical systems presented by Greek philosophers. For example, Aristotle (384-322 BC), in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, presents a system in ethics which has been based on virtues. Virtues are characters which an agent should have if (s)he wants to gain happiness (*eudemonia*). If so, obtaining no virtues means that the agent will not experience a moral life as well as happiness.

However, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the great German philosopher, in his ethical account, e.g. in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, criticizes Aristotelian understanding of happiness, etc. [Kant, 1889, pp.210-215]. He presents, then, another ethical system which is based on the pure practical reason and the concept of "duty" and "Moral Law". This can be a reason which identifies Kantian Ethics as a rational-deontological system.

However, is the well-known understanding of virtue and virtue-based ethical systems complete? Shall we really restrict virtue ethics to those systems which follow Aristotle and his *Nicomachean ethics*? Is criticizing the Greek-ethical accounts, presented by Kant, an enough reason to consider him and his moral philosophy a non-virtue ethics? In this paper, I try to show that the well-known reading of Kantian ethics is not complete. It seems that Kantian system is based both on virtues and duties. Indeed, the virtue ethics can be traced both in Aristotelian and Kantian ethics.

In the interest of finding the issues, the paper has been charted as follows. In the first part, the Aristotelian viewpoint of virtue ethics will be summarized. Then, we pay so careful attention to the statements of Kant's ethical system, particularly his *Second Critique*, show that the agent's character plays an important role for considering an action as a moral one. This helps us to present another aspect of Kant's moral system, i.e. virtue ethics. Finally, it will be concluded that Kantian ethics is a rational-virtue ethics rather than a mere deontological ethics.

Aristotle and Virtue Ethics

Having a look on well-known accounts of ethics, it is undeniable that virtue ethics is of a great significance during centuries. Some philosophers hold that the roots of all accounts of virtue ethics can be traced in ancient Greek philosophy. Accordingly, these roots of the accounts of virtue ethics can be summarized in three main concepts: *arête* (excellence or virtue), *phronesis* (practical or moral wisdom) and *eudaimonia* (usually known as happiness or flourishing). [Hursthouse, 2013]

Based on the roots of this ethical account, virtue refers to the disposition which is well internalized in its possessor. So, the concept of a virtue is the concept of something that makes its possessor good. A virtuous person is a morally

good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels well, rightly, as she should.

Accordingly, Aristotle, who presents his viewpoint of virtue ethics in *Nicomachean Ethics*, holds that "we [as agents] have the capacity to understand ourselves and our natural good. And we have the capacity to make our nonrational desires (corresponding to the appetites and emotions of the lower two parts of Plato's tripartite soul) conform with and support our reasoned understanding of our good. The human good therefore consists first of all in the perfection of these three capacities, through the development of the virtues appropriate to each: the virtues of the theoretical intellect (summed up in wisdom, *sophia*); those of the practical intellect (practical wisdom— *phronesis*—and its constituents); and the moral virtues or virtues of character (the virtues that organize the nonreasoning desires). Those who possess all the human virtues and direct their lives through them, provided they are not seriously interfered with by bad health or lack of necessary external goods, lead naturally flourishing and happy lives[*eudaimonia*]" . [Cooper, 2003, p.16]

If so, the agent, who wants to lead happiness, should be virtuous. How is it possible, then, to be virtuous? Does it have any particular process? Is it easy to be virtuous? In the interest of finding the answers, let us return to *Nicomachean ethics*.

In the first instance, Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* tries to describe the meaning of virtue which is more practical. As he states "[v]irtue, then, is a state involving rational choice, consisting in a mean relative to us and determined by reason – the reason, that is, by reference to which the practically wise person would determine it. It is a mean between two vices, one of excess, the other of deficiency. It is a mean also in that some vices fall short of what is right in feelings and actions, and others exceed it, while virtue both attains and chooses the mean. So, in respect of its essence and the definition of its substance,

virtue is a mean, while with regard to what is best and good it is an extreme." [1107a; Aristotle, Book II, Chap.6]

In the second, he presents the process of being virtuous. Based on the meaning of the virtues which "[e]nough has been said (...) that it is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency; and that it is such because it is the sort of thing able to hit the mean in feelings and actions" (1109a; Book II, Chap.9), it is obligatory for the agent to avoid vices, i.e. excess and deficiency. This process which needs time to be internalized helps the agent to be a virtuous and a good man.

Finally, he emphasizes that being virtuous is a difficult task needs mental and physical practice. As he insists "it is hard to be good, because in each case it is hard to find the middle point; for instance, not everyone can find the centre of a circle,

but only the person with knowledge. So too anyone can get angry, or give and spend money – these are easy; but doing them in relation to the right person, in the right amount, at the right time, with the right aim in view, and in the right way – that is not something anyone can do, nor is it easy. This is why excellence in these things is rare, praise-worthy and noble." [1109a; Aristotle, Book II, Chap.9]

Kant and His Ethical System

As it has mentioned earlier, the well-known reading of Kantian ethics identifies it as a deontological account. Deontological viewpoint, named by moral philosophers, refers to the viewpoint in which an action will be morally evaluated without taking into account any consequences of it. For example, telling lie will be considered as an immoral action even in situations in which it saves the agent's life.

The well-known reading identifies Kantian system as a deontological one as "the supreme principle of morality is a standard of rationality that [Kant] dubbed the "Categorical Imperative" (CI)" and "the CI [is] (...) an objective, rationally necessary and unconditional principle that we must always follow despite any natural desires or inclinations we may have to the contrary". [Johnson & Cureton, 2017] The main reason of this judgment is the idea that the goodness of an action in Kantian ethics is not based on the goodness of the outcome. It only depends on following CI which is a rational and unconditional principle.

Is this well-known reading of Kantian ethics complete¹? Is merely following the CI enough for doing a moral action? Did Kant really neglect the character of the agent who wants to do a moral action? What follows tries to investigate for the possible answers.

According to Kant's viewpoint, there is a sharp distinction between kinds of following CI². He applied the words *legality* and *morality* to mention the difference. As he insists "[i]f the determination of the will takes place in conformity indeed to the moral law, but only by means of a feeling, no matter of what kind, which has to be presupposed in order that the law may be sufficient to determine the will, and therefore not for the sake of the law then the action will possess *legality* but not *morality*." [Kant, 1889, p.164]

Kant, once again in *Second Critique*, emphasizes the mentioned difference when he explains the concept of duty. As he mentions "[t]he notion of duty, therefore, requires in the action, objectively, agreement with the law, and, subjectively in its maxim, that respect for the law shall be the sole mode in which the will is determined thereby. And on this rests the distinction between the consciousness of having acted according to duty and from duty, that is, from respect for the law. The former (*legality*) is possible even if inclinations have been the determining principles of the will; but the latter (*morality*), moral worth, can be placed only in this, that the action is done from duty, that is, simply for the sake of the law." [Kant, 1889, p.174]

Accordingly, not the action, done by following the CI, can be considered as a moral one. Those actions which only have been done for the sake of the Moral law can be identified as moral actions.

Doing the actions for the sake of Moral Law is the last point which the well-known reading of Kantian ethics mentions. However, another step still exists for leading to morality. If "moral worth can be placed only in (...) the action is done from duty, that is, simply for the sake of the law" [Kant, 1889, p.174], it can be concluded that the character of the agent plays an important role for considering an action as a *moral action* while the moral worth is related to the character of the agent. It can be considered as a reason why Kant puts emphasis on the process of being moral in the last parts of his *Second Critique*.

Kant presents two processes in which the agent leads to *morality*. "At first", as Kant memorably states, "we are only concerned to make the judging of actions by moral laws a natural employment accompanying all our own free actions, as well as the observation of those of others, and to make it, as it were, a habit, and to sharpen this judgment, asking first whether the action conforms objectively to the moral law, and to what law; and we distinguish the law that merely furnishes a principle of obligation from that which is really obligatory (*leges obligandi a legibus obligantibus*); as for instance the law of what men's wants require from me, as contrasted with that which their rights demand, the latter of which prescribes essential, the former only non-essential duties; and thus we teach how to distinguish different kinds of duties which meet in the same action. The other point to which attention must be directed is the question whether the action was also (subjectively) done for the sake of the moral law, so that it not only is morally correct as a deed, but also by the maxim from which it is done has moral worth as a disposition. Now there is no doubt that this practice, and the resulting culture of our reason in judging merely of the practical, must gradually produce a certain rest even in the law of reason, and consequently in morally good actions." [Kant, 1889, p. 25.] Then, "the *second* exercise comes in, the living exhibition of morality of character by examples, in which attention is directed to purity of will, first only as a negative perfection, in so far as in an action done from duty no motives of inclination have any influence in determining." [Kant, 1889, p.259]²¹

Finally, Kant insists that doing the process is a difficult task. Similar to the statement appeared in *Nicomachean Ethics*³, Kant holds that "[b]y this [process] the pupil's attention is fixed upon the consciousness of his freedom, and although this renunciation at first excites a feeling of pain, nevertheless, by its withdrawing the pupil from the constraint of even real wants, there is proclaimed to him at the same time a deliverance from the manifold dissatisfaction in which all these wants entangle him, and the mind is made capable of receiving the sensation of satisfaction from other sources." [Kant, 1889, p.259]

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been investigated if the well-known reading of Kantian ethics, which identifies it as a deontological viewpoint, is complete. It has been discussed that the reading does not consider all parts of the Kantian moral system. By comparing the ideas mentioned in virtue ethics, particularly in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, with Kantian ethics, it is not impossible to hold that Kantian ethics is a kind of virtue ethics. Although Kantian process of being moral is different from what has been presented by Aris-

¹ There are debates between philosophers who thinks that Kantian ethics should be understood correctly or those who believes that virtue simply means "moral strength of will" [Jost and Vuerth, 2011, p. 69]. For example, "perhaps the first philosopher to suggest a teleological reading of Kant", as R. Johnson and Cureton state, "was John Stuart Mill. In the first chapter of his *Utilitarianism*, Mill implies that the Universal Law formulation of the Categorical Imperative could only sensibly be interpreted as a test of the consequences of universal adoption of a maxim." [Johnson & Cureton, 2017] However, what is meant in this paper by applying the word *complete* is related to the concept of "following CI" as well as "respecting to the moral law" in Kant's philosophy while it seems closer to the doctrine of virtue ethics.

² CI applied here is equivalent to Moral Law in Kant's statement.

³ Aristotle believes that "we should drag ourselves in the opposite direction, because we shall arrive at the mean by holding far off from where we would miss the mark, just as people do when straightening warped pieces of wood." [1109b; Aristotle, BookII, Chap.9]

totally contently, the character of the agent plays a vital role in both viewpoints.

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Мір Мохаммаді Сайед Мохаммад Хоссейн

МОРАЛЬНА ФІЛОСОФІЯ КАНТА: ДЕОНТОЛОГІЯ ЧИ ЕТИКА ЧЕСНОТ?

Відоме і сучасне прочитання Кантової етики визначає його як деонтологічну точку зору, яка робить акцент на понятті обов'язку і тих діях, які здійснюються заради морального закону. Відповідно, моральні дії – це лише ті дії, які здійснюються заради морального закону. Можливу причину можна прослідкувати в акценті Канта на "Категоричному імперативі" та на понятті "повага до морального права". Проте це відоме прочитання Кантової етики не є повним. У даній статті зроблена спроба показати, що, хоча й поняття обов'язку відіграє важливу роль у Кантовій етиці, роль і звички дієвця також відіграють важливу роль. Якщо це так, то можна стверджувати, що Кантову етику слід розглядати скоріше як етику раціональної чесноти, а не деонтологічну точку зору.

Ключові слова: деонтологія, етика чеснот, категоричний імператив, моральний закон, характер дієвця.

Мир Мохаммади Сайед Мохаммад Хоссейн

МОРАЛЬНАЯ ФИЛОСОФИЯ КАНТА: ДЕОНТОЛОГИЯ ИЛИ ЭТИКА ДОБРОДЕТЕЛИ?

Известное и современное прочтение кантовской этики определяет его как деонтологическую точку зрения, которая делает акцент на понятии долга и тех действиях, которые совершаются ради нравственного закона. Соответственно, моральные действия – это только те действия, которые совершаются ради морального закона. Возможная причина может быть прослежена в акценте Канта на "Категорическом императиве" и на понятии "уважение к нравственному праву". Однако это известное прочтение кантовской этики не является полным. В этой статье делается попытка показать, что, хотя понятие долга играет важную роль в кантовской этике, роль и привычки актора также играют важную роль. Если это так, можно утверждать, что кантовскую этику следует рассматривать скорее как этику рациональной добродетели, а не как деонтологическую точку зрения.

Ключевые слова: деонтология, этика добродетели, категорический императив, нравственный закон, характер актора.