

## Linking Knowledge with Ethics: A Kantian Perspective

Jeet Ghosh

Doctoral Fellow, Dept. of Philosophy, Gauhati University

---

### Abstract

---

The connection between knowledge and ethics has been a subject of philosophical inquiry for centuries. Immanuel Kant, one of the most influential philosophers in the modern history, attempted to reconcile two critical domains: the synthesis of knowledge and the foundation of morality. He offers a profound perspective that intertwines both domains. His critical philosophy, specifically within his *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason*, established a framework wherein human knowledge and moral cognition converge. Kant posits that the synthesis of knowledge involves a combination of sensory experience (intuition) and rational concepts (categories). By the combination of these two we formed the empirical reality. Meanwhile, his moral philosophy is rooted in the autonomy of the will and the categorical imperative, offering a rational basis for moral action. This paper examines the connection between Kant's epistemology and ethics, elucidating how the synthesis of knowledge shapes moral awareness provides the groundwork for moral laws.

**Keywords:** Space, Time, Sensibility, Understanding, Good Will, Duty, Categorical Imperative.

### Introduction:

Immanuel Kant was considered as an epoch-making philosopher. He has left a profound and enduring legacy across a range of fields, including ethics, political theories and aesthetics. Kant's emergence in the realm of European philosophy marked a pivotal moment in its history. His entry into the landscape of European philosophical thought signifies a crucial turning point. Philosophical problems took on a new aspect and they began to be viewed from a novel point of view. His ideas continue to shape contemporary thought across various disciplines. Kant influence permeates moral discourse, political structure and artistic theory. His revolutionary ideas about the nature of human knowledge, the foundation of morality, the criteria for aesthetic judgment have sparked going debates and inspired countless scholars and practitioners. Kant contribution remain pivotal in

understanding and addressing the complex challenges of today's world. Kant's contributions to philosophy are foundational, particularly through his works, *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Paul Guyer said that "Kant originally conceived of the work that he came to the *Critique of Pure Reason* as the sole foundation that would be necessary before he could on to provide detailed systems of theoretical and practical philosophy, which he called the "metaphysics of nature" and the "metaphysics of Morals"- as he conceived the work and even when he first published it, he clearly did not conceive of the two subsequent critiques that he would write, the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790)"<sup>1</sup>.

His 'Copernican Revolution' in philosophy posited that our understanding of the world is shaped by the mind's inherent structures and categories. This idea had a profound impact on subsequent philosophical movements such as in German Idealism, Phenomenology, Existentialism and even Analytic Philosophy.

Kant was supposed to establish a new science, viz, the science of knowledge or epistemology. Undoubtedly, philosopher before Kant addressed the concept of knowledge in their system, but nobody formulated the problem of knowledge in the way in which Kant envisioned the subject. His *Critique of Pure Reason* signifies the critical examination of the faculty of a priori representation with a view to determining the conditions, sources and limit of a priori knowledge. So, here pure reason is the subject as well as object. If we look at the prefaces of the first and second editions of *Critique of Pure Reason* and first section of *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, we find that the author is placing an obvious emphasis on the problem of metaphysics. In the preface of the first edition of *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant writes-

"Human reason has its peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is not able to answer"<sup>2</sup>

Kant has shown that there was a time when metaphysics was considered as the queen of all sciences. Nevertheless, in Kant's time it had lost its credibility. Metaphysics became a battle of endless and inconclusive disputes. Initially dogmatists dominated the field of metaphysics. Kant considers that a dogmatist is one who without a critical assessment of our ability to know, naively thinks that he can know everything and answers every query. Kant argues that metaphysics claims to give us a priori knowledge which is independent of all experience, so the criticism of reason will decide whether metaphysics is possible or not, and if possible, what is the ground of its validity and how far it can go. So, Kant thinks that epistemology is prior to metaphysics. He has given a survey of metaphysical questions and shown how reason falls into apparent contradiction and how this can be averted. Kant asserts that there is not a single metaphysical problem which has not been resolved in the critique. Pure reason is such a perfect unity that if its

principle cannot address even one legitimate question, its capacity to solve others cannot be trusted. In the first critique Kant was concerned to assert how far reason can understand without any help from experience, that is, the extent of our a priori knowledge. So, the central question can be stated in this way; what and how much reason can understand without taking any assistance from experience?

Most of the prominent interpreters in recent time hold that Kant's aim in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is to give a theory of experience, a theory of scientific knowledge or a theory of knowledge generally, though others have attacked this interpretation. The fundamental aim of Critique from beginning to end, is not offer a theory of experience, but to resolve the problem, '*How is metaphysics possible as a science?*' Prichard writes, "Kant's problem is similar to Locke's. Locke states that his purpose to inquire into the original, certainty, and extend of human knowledge"<sup>3</sup>. If we examine the general problem, how is a priori knowledge possible or how are synthetic judgments possible, and at the same time and simultaneously, Kant's agreement with Hume regarding the impossibility of deriving necessity and strict universality from empirical data, we can see how challenging it would be for Kant to uphold that knowledge consists simply in conformity of the mind to its objects. If we say, to know an object our mind must conform itself to then, it would be impossible to explain how we can make necessary and strictly universal judgments. Kant proposed an alternative hypothesis that objects must conform to our knowledge. This hypothesis, philosophers observe is analogous to one proposed by Copernicus. So, many philosophers call it 'Copernicus Revolution'. And this refers to a fundamental shift in the way we understand the relationship between knowledge and objects. Just as Copernicus proposed that the earth is moving around the sun, Kant was first who suggested that our understanding of the world is not merely a passive reflection of external objects. That is our knowledge of the world is constructed through our own frameworks and categories. He shifted the focus of epistemology from the nature of objects to the nature of the human mind and its faculties. But Copernicus Revolution does not suggest the view that reality can be reduced to the human mind and its ideas. Kant is not arguing that the human mind creates things, as far as their existence is concerned. If we propose that human mind is purely passive, then we are incapable of explaining the a priori knowledge which we undoubtedly possess. Kant assert that mind imposes as it were, on the ultimate stuff of experience its own forms of cognition, determined by the structure of human sensibility and understanding. And objects cannot be known except through the vehicle of these forms. The objects are presented to conscious experience, the things about which we reflect (a tree, for example), is already processed to these cognitive forms which the human mind imposes by a natural necessity. The cognitive structure thus defines the possibility of objects.

### **Formation of Human Knowledge:**

We can see in *Transcendental Aesthetic* that there are two sources of human knowledge, namely, sensibility and understanding. The concepts of receptivity

and spontaneity are linked with sensibility and understanding. Sensibility offers us intuitions and understanding offers concepts. But intuitions and concepts are not considered as cognitions. They are considered to be the components of knowledge which in their combination constitute the actual knowledge. Both sensibility and understanding are equally and necessarily important for knowledge. Concepts necessitate some content (intuition) given through sense. In order to form a part of true knowledge, intuition requires to be brought under concept or category. Thought without content or we can say concepts without intuitions are empty, and intuitions without concepts are blind. Sensibility and understanding must work together to give rise to knowledge. Nevertheless, they cannot switch their functions. Reason cannot intuit, just as sensibility cannot think. Kant was the first philosopher who tells us that objects are given through the sense and thought through the understanding. So, Kant disagrees with empiricists who claim that all human knowledge is exclusively derived from experience, for there are a-priori elements in knowledge which cannot be explained by purely empiricist's principles. But Kant shares the empiricists' view that objects are given to us through sensory experience. Sense perception inherently involves an activity. *Transcendental Analytic* shows that understanding synthesizes the sensory perception under its own conceptualization. So, without having intuition no objects can be presented to us and without concepts no objects can be thought. Thus, for Kant categories are the framework of objectivity and devoid of them, no knowledge could be achievable, because then knowledge could have no object. They are incapable to apprehend the realities that are beyond the scope of sensory perception. In order to form the knowledge, Kant proposed that,

“it is necessary: (1) That the conceptions be pure and not empirical; (2) That they belong not to intuition and sensibility, but to thought and understanding; (3) That they be elementary conceptions, and as such, quite different from deduced or compound conceptions; (4) That our table of these elementary conceptions be complete”<sup>4</sup>

So, it would be legitimate and proper to apply these categories within the sphere of experience in which alone an object can be given to us. Kant observes that we may be tempted to apply the categories in situation that exceed the bounds of feasible experiential knowledge. According to *Transcendental Dialectic* examines the inappropriate use of the categories. So, for him any metaphysics that employs pure concepts of understanding to surpass experience cannot rightfully assert itself as a science. Kant asserts that there are certain ideas that go beyond experience, with no object given in experiential reality, such as, the idea of immortal soul as a spiritual principle, the idea of all-knowing God and the universe as a whole.

### **Limits of Knowledge:**

Kant's attitude towards metaphysics that was presented in first Critique is more complex. He suggested that our impulse towards metaphysics is an eradicable impulse of the human mind. We possess the a priori concepts of God, freedom and immortality of soul, for which there is no corresponding element in our actual experience. Metaphysics deals with the a priori concepts and claim to provide us knowledge about them. Metaphysics as a natural disposition is possible. Furthermore, for things that are spatial and temporal, only sensible intuition is feasible. We need to be affected to know them. However, God does not know things via, sensible intuition. According to Kant, though theoretically we cannot know God, freedom and soul, but we can think about them and may believe in them. Because there is no contradiction in supposing that we are free. So, there are practical basis for such a belief.

Kant posits that apart from our knowledge of objects derived from sense intuition, there exist moral knowledge, we can be said to know, that we ought to tell the truth. In *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant said that such knowledge is a priori, and it does not depend on men's actual behaviour. Even, all people lied, it would remain true that they should not do so. The statement is true independent of their particular conduct. For necessity and universality are the indicators of a priori knowledge. If we assert that men should tell the truth, then our knowledge of the existence of men relies on experience. But there must have an a priori element in the judgment. The main duty of moral philosophers is to identify the a priori component in our moral understanding and demonstrate their origin. We can characterize moral philosophers as exploring how synthetic a priori proposition in ethics are possible. Kant was trying to discover the a priori principles according to which we judge our moral actions. But he was not supplying a brand-new set of categories. Kant said that we are not explicitly aware of the a priori principles of morality. If we were already aware of these a priori principles, then the task of isolating them would be meaningless. Our moral understanding takes as a whole contains a variety of elements, and the main duty of a moral philosopher is to uncover the a priori aspects.

In Kant's moral theory, our focus will mainly be on *Metaphysics of Morals* rather than on speculative metaphysics. Kant did not hold that morality should be based on natural theology. According to Kant, belief in God is based on our moral awareness. So, we learn that the *Metaphysics of Morals* seeks to explore the origin of the practical principles that are discovered a priori within our reason. And *Groundwork* is described as the examination and establishment of supreme principle of morality. In *Groundwork* the very first section deals with the transition from our ordinary moral cognition to philosophical moral cognition, the second part with the transition from popular moral philosophy to the metaphysics of morals and the third part with the transition from metaphysics of morals to the critique of pure practical reason.

### **A good will and duty:**

*The Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals* begins with the discussion of good will- “it is impossible to think of anything in the worlds, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will”<sup>5</sup>. Kant opens his treatise in this dramatic way. Here Kant is elucidating a truth that exists, at least implicitly, within the ordinary moral knowledge. Kant stated that the external possession such as wealth, health etc. is susceptible to misuse. They are not good without qualification. In the same way the mental talent, such as, the quickness of understanding, courage, resolutions are no doubt good and desirable for many purposes. But they can become extremely evil and harmful if the will which is to make use of these gifts of nature is not good. In the absence of good will, they can become incredibly malevolent. But a good will is good because of its willing. Usefulness or productivity can neither amplify this merit nor subtract from it. The good will is only thing whose value is unwavering and immune to constraints. The good will of a person would shine like a jewel. Its value remains steady regardless of its effectiveness.

Kant turns his attention to the notion of duty, which he believes is the essential element of moral consciousness. The concept of duty implies the concept of a good will. A will that acts for the sake of duty is a good will under human condition. According to Patton, Kant expounds on the concept of duty through three propositions, but he explicitly mentions only the second and third. The first proposition, though he explicitly mentions it, it seems like: an action has moral worth when it is done from duty. An action lacks do not have moral worth, if it does not follow moral point of view. The second proposition about duty is that: “An action done from duty has its moral worth not in the purpose to be attained by it but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon, and therefore does not depend upon the realization of the object of the action but merely upon the principle of volition in accordance with the action is done without regard for any object of the faculty of desire”<sup>6</sup>.

In the first proposition we have seen that an action has moral worth only if that action is done for the sake of duty. The second proposition adds that the moral worth of that action does not depend upon the result that the action produces or seek to produce. If our action cannot be derived from any inclination, then it cannot be derived from result it is sought or produced. An action done from duty has its moral worth from a maxim and the maxim is not the maxim of producing effect. The third proposition about duty is: “Duty is the necessity to act out of reverence for the law”<sup>7</sup>. This law must be articulated as a duty that orders us to be obedient. The law is regarded as one enforced upon us; it arouses a feeling akin to fear. Conversely, having realized that we ourselves have imposed this on us, it should arise a feeling akin to inclination. It is kind of feeling what Kant calls reverence. This feeling does not originate from any kind of external sensory stimulation. Therefore, it can be understood that if morally good actions are

motivated by this specific feeling, it is justifiable to state that they are performed out of reverence for the law.

### ***Formulation of The Categorical Imperative:***

The question pertains to the character of this law, through which a good will attains its distinct absolute worth. According to Timmermann, in outlining the nature of the law by which a person of will acts, Kant introduces the initial version of the supreme principle of morality termed as categorical imperative. If there is such a thing as moral obligation, then we must acknowledge that our wills are guided by this principle- “Act according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”<sup>8</sup>. Kant states that his analysis is in total agreement with ordinary human reason. That is to say, an ordinary good man does not formulate the above principle in abstraction, rather he genuinely applies it when assessing specific moral issues. Categorical imperative is unconditional and does not relate to a goal or outcome that the individual aims to attain. From this idea, one can infer that a categorical imperative demands that an individual adopts only those maxims that they can simultaneously will as a universal principle. Kant maintains that the aforementioned formulation is the standard and most general expression of the categorical imperative. There is just one categorical imperative, which is referred to as the Formula of Universal Law (FUL). Other unconditional imperatives are either variations of this principle or distinct categorical imperatives.

According to Kant, since the moral law, if it exists, must apply universally and necessarily, it cannot be founded on a hypothetical imperative. The categorical imperative applies to all rational beings, irrespective of the different ends an individual may have, and could be serve as the foundation for moral law. The categorical imperative is Kant’s supreme principle of morality, presented in an imperative form.

### **Conclusion:**

Kant’s contribution in epistemology and ethics serve as a cornerstone for modern philosophy, offering a cohesive framework that addresses both how we come to know the world and how we ought to act within it. His epistemology establishes that knowledge is a product of both sensory experience and rational conceptualization. While, his moral philosophy lays out how human action must align with rational, self-imposed moral laws. The synthesis of these two domains reveals that knowledge and morality are not isolated facets of human experience, rather they are deeply interconnected through the rational capacities of human beings. The first critique lays the epistemological groundwork by explaining how human beings come to know and structure their experience of the world. It establishes the role of reason in shaping reality through categories of understanding, thereby giving the structure to empirical knowledge. *The Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals* builds upon this rational structure to explore the nature of moral law. It reveals that the same rational capacities that

allow humans to understand the world also enable them to determine how to act ethically within it. Epistemology is also a normative study, there are certain norms, rules which we need to follow. The practical reason which demands the adoption of universal moral laws reflects the synthetic capacity of the mind outlined in Kant's epistemology. As the rational agent, human beings can impose both conceptual structure upon the world and the moral structure upon their actions.

Kant's integration of the phenomenal and noumenal provides a comprehensive vision of human freedom. In the phenomenal world, we perceive categories and understand experiences, while in the noumenal realm, we act in accordance with moral principles. Thus, human beings live with one foot in empirical reality and other in the noumenal world.

### References:

1. Guyer, Paul. *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 3.
2. Smith, Norman Kemp, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1929, p. 7.
3. Prichard, Harold. *Kant's Theory of Knowledge*. Clarendon Press, 1909, p. 10.
4. Meiklejohn, J. M. D. *The Critique of Pure Reason by Immanuel Kant*. A Penn State Electronic Classics Series Publication, 2010, p. 72.
5. Gregor, Mary. "Immanuel Kant: Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals". Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 7.
6. Jemberie, Abraham Tsehay. "A Critical Analysis of Immanuel Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals". International Journal of Research and Review, 2017, p. 58.
7. Paton, H. J. *The Moral Law or Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Hutchison & Co. Publishers Ltd, 1956, p. 21.
8. Varaba, Dinebari D. and Charles N. Berebon. *The Philosophy of Law of Immanuel Kant*. Tamaddun Life, 2022, p. 273.