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## **Kant – Theory of Motive and Theory of Duty**

In ethics, there are two main theories when discussing moral philosophy. They are the “Theory of Motive” and the “Theory of Duty”. While the Theory of Motive explains what the truly moral motive is, the Theory of Duty evaluates what makes an act right or wrong and how we judge the morality of our actions. Immanuel Kant had very detailed justifications for his opinions on each of these theories, however there are still several legitimate criticisms of Kantian ethics.

The Theory of Motive evaluates questions such as: “What is the measure of a good character?”, “What is the measure of virtue?”, “What is the truly moral motive?”, and “What is intrinsically good?”. Answering these questions is important in order to discover a motive that is consistent and can be applied to all types of situations.

For example, when people donate to charity only so they can benefit from a tax write-off, they are technically doing the right thing but it still does not reflect any virtue in them. The act itself is good but the motive for the act is not stemming from anything virtuous.

The Theory of Duty evaluates questions such as: “What makes an act right or wrong?”, “How do we judge the morality of our actions?”, “What is the principle of morality and what rules are generated by it?”. Discovering the defining characteristic of moral judgments is important in order to make virtuous decisions uniformly in our every day life. There are situations when people act in such a way that reflects good moral character, however they are actually doing the wrong thing.

For example, when you see a bum on a street corner and you decide to give him money. If he spends the money on food the outcome of your donation is positive, however if he chooses to spend the money on drugs then the result of your charity has had a negative effect. It is here that a dilemma arises of whether a moral obligation should depend on the consequences of the act. One could argue that giving money to a homeless person is always a moral obligation no matter what the outcome is. On the other hand, some would argue that the possibilities of every situation should be weighed before actually making any donation.

The most extreme deontological ethicist, Immanuel Kant, had specific views about each moral theory. Being a deontological ethicist, Kant believed that how one accomplishes something is more important than what he accomplishes.

Kant's Theory of Motive was goodwill. He believed that goodwill was the only consistent motive that could measure virtue and good character. In the case of the person who donated to charity solely for the nice tax write off, according to Kant, the act is not motivated by goodwill and is therefore not virtuous. The same could be said for when politicians hug school children and kiss babies for the media. Their acts are only to obtain a good reputation and publicity but they are not motivated by goodwill, and so, Kant would argue that they are not virtuous or moral.

Kant's Theory of Duty (or moral obligation) was universality. He believed that a duty must be universal for all people and all circumstances, and that the maxim of one's actions can become a universal law of human conduct. For example, telling a lie would not be a right or moral act because if it were to become a universal law, nobody would be telling the truth and everything would be chaos. There would be no point in making statements or promises because everything you hear would be false.

The motive of goodwill and the theory of universality may sound like they are good standards to use when making rules of morality, however there are several criticisms that can be made about them.

For one, always being motivated by goodwill may be too stringent of a rule. Bill Gates gives millions of dollars away to charity each year because our government requires him to. Although he, and most wealthy people in general, probably would not donate to charity on their own (at least not as generously), the net good that is achieved from their donations may make the act okay even without goodwill. There were still millions of orphans that were fed and expensive medical research that was done thanks to their donations. So can such an act really be classified as immoral?

A second major criticism of Kantian ethics is that there is no resolution for moral conflicts. For example, assume you have made a promise to a friend to have lunch at 12 noon. On your way there you witness a huge accident in which you could provide some assistance. You know that if you stop to assist the victims you will never make it to lunch and you will be breaking the promise you made to your friend. On the other hand, you are the first to arrive on the scene and you can potentially save someone's life because they will die if they wait for an ambulance to arrive.

Because Kant believes that keeping promises is a rule (going back to universality where all rules must be consistent and reversible), he would argue that you should not stop and help the victims of this horrible wreck and you should keep your promise to your friend. Kant would justify this by saying that, If everyone were allowed to break promises, then there would be no reason to make promises or commitments in the first place because they would mean nothing. This is a problem because ignoring the moral obligation to save a life is conflicting with your obligation to your friend. Kant mentions no considerations for these dilemmas in his moral theories.

It is important to evaluate and closely examine all aspects of both the Theory of Motive and the Theory of Duty so that we can consistently make good and moral decisions in our daily lives. Although Kant may be a bit extreme in his views, it is important to understand all possible conflicts that moral motives and obligations encompass, and be able to provide a consistent way to justify your decisions. A complete understanding of these moral acts will help us make virtuous decisions consistently and provide us with the ability to make the same decisions in similar situations.