

# On Kant's Moral Philosophy and Its Contemporary Value

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**Abstract:** *Kant's moral philosophy shows the characteristics of transcendentalism and purity, focusing on and emphasizing the motivation and result of behavior. This philosophical framework has had a profound impact on the development of the history of western philosophy. This paper first expounds the core idea of Kant's moral philosophy as a starting point, and then deeply studies and probes into the three dimensions and concrete contents contained in his philosophical system. In addition, the article also analyzes the practical significance of Kant's moral philosophy system in the development of contemporary society, and summarizes it.*

**Keywords:** Moral philosophy, Metaphysics, Practical significance.

## 1. Introduction

When most moral philosophers first encounter Kant's ideas, they tend to form an initial impression based on his early works, rather than directly reading core works such as the Critique of Pure Reason or the Critique of Practical Reason. To some extent, this phenomenon has led to the general misunderstanding of the basic views of Kant's philosophy. For example, one widely held but perhaps biased understanding is that Kant's claim on moral reasoning is reduced to the idea that individuals, in their actions, should measure whether their actions can be applied to all as a general law. This tendency to express causes Kant's supporters and opponents to regard the universal standard almost instinctively as the first principle of his moral reasoning. The reality, however, is that in the Metaphysics of Morals, the use of universal standards is infrequent, and is mainly confined to a specific duty - that of good will towards others. This is perhaps not surprising, since moral metaphysics focuses on positive moral legislation, while generalized tests are applied more negatively, judging whether an action is prohibited or permissible. Thus, in Kant's theory, doing good to others becomes the only duty directly derived from and actively established by the principle of universalization, since he believes that the ultimate and necessary goal of every human being is the pursuit of his own happiness. Although Kant has reservations about the empiricist view of happiness, he does not oppose the pursuit of happiness by the masses, and makes a deep exploration of the relationship between happiness and morality. He believed that those members of society with high moral character and strict observance of moral norms were more qualified and often able to actually achieve happiness. When evaluating the moral nature of behavior, Kant emphasizes the importance of the purity of motive and the effect of behavior, which constitute the important basis for judging the morality of behavior.

In China, experts and scholars have been studying Kant's moral philosophy for more than a century, during which remarkable research results have been achieved. In this field, Deng Xiaomang has attracted much attention for his first translation of Kant's original German works, and he has a deep and unique understanding of the theoretical basis and structure of Kant's moral philosophy. Deng Xiaomang

divides Kant's moral philosophy into three levels: first, popular moral philosophy, which is the introduction and foundation of Kant's moral thought; The second is moral metaphysics, which deeply discusses the essence and principle of morality. The last is the critique of practical reason, which further explains the universality and practical application of moral law. These three levels together constitute the complete system of Kant's moral philosophy.

## 2. Popular Moral Philosophy

Kant's popular moral philosophy is a simple and intuitive moral concept, its core point of view: Kant believes that the moral value and meaning of a thing mainly depend on the actor's own "good will" and internal motivation, rather than its practicality and utility. The "good will" here refers to the good of one's own heart, which is not affected by any external conditions. In Kant's view, nature gives human beings the power of reason, not merely to satisfy their emotional desires, but to achieve a higher ideal and purpose, namely, the concept of "duty," which contains a good will. And Kant's popular moral philosophy is divided into moral consensus: Kant's popular moral philosophy expresses a universal moral consensus in people's hearts. For example, people generally believe that to be a moral and educated person, do not do those immoral things, such as stealing, hurting others and so on. Good will: Kant emphasizes that good will is the core of moral action. The good will is the only, unconditional good, because it is not influenced by any external condition, but by the intrinsic motivation of the actor himself. Duty and responsibility: In popular moral philosophy, Kant also emphasized the importance of duty and responsibility. People should act according to those principles that can become universal laws, and treat others only as ends in themselves, not merely as means. From the perspective of popular moral philosophy, the behavior following popular moral rules is not out of the pursuit of a specific purpose or gain, but in accordance with the principle of "acting for morality itself, acting to fulfill obligations". For example, in People's Daily life, honesty is regarded as a commendable behavior, and those who take honesty as a principle of conduct will naturally gain the respect of others. In addition, the kind of behavior that does not want to return and is willing to help others, also reflects noble moral sentiments, and is also an important standard for the public to measure morality in daily life. This

kind of behavior reflects the inner recognition and conscious practice of moral values.

### 3. Moral Metaphysics

Moral metaphysics is a conceptual framework that Kant tried to apply to his own ethical system and named after it. However, as Kant's ethical theory was evolving, especially his understanding of the role of empiricism in ethics, the meaning of the term also changed. In short, moral metaphysics in Kant is a concept that changes dynamically with the development of his ethical thought, aiming to explore the essence and foundation of morality.

In the period of the creation of Critique of Pure Reason, metaphysics was defined by Kant as a comprehensive system of transcendental principles. Accordingly, he also clearly defined the scope of use of the concept of "moral metaphysics". According to Kant, moral metaphysics is a system based on the highest moral principles, in which all moral obligations are a priori, that is, they are completely independent of any human empirical knowledge. Therefore, in the field of moral philosophy, there is a strict distinction between moral metaphysics and practical anthropology, and moral principles can be effectively applied only in the scope of moral metaphysics.

In his Critique of Practical Reason, Kant once again emphasized the core concepts of moral metaphysics - the transcendental nature of moral supreme principles and the purity of moral motives. He worried that if empirical elements were allowed to permeate it, moral theory might become too dependent on human experience, which could lead to the distortion of moral principles in favor of human self-love tendencies, thereby losing the objectivity and universality of moral principles. Kant insisted that true moral principles must be transcendental, pure, and unaffected by human experience. Although Kant explicitly states in the preface to the Principles of Moral Metaphysics (often referred to simply as the Foundations) that "moral metaphysics, that is, pure moral philosophy, covers only transcendental principles, and all empiricism falls under the category of practical anthropology" [1], in his subsequent work on Moral Metaphysics he acknowledges a different view: "The metaphysics of morality itself cannot be entirely free from the application of experience, because we often make human nature the object of study, which can only be understood through experience" [2]. This shift means that pure principles, when applied in combination with partial experience, open up a broader field for moral philosophy to deal with situations of human relations that cannot be dealt with empirically alone. This realization led Kant to revise his earlier views and realize that moral metaphysics consists not of a set of pure moral principles completely divorced from experience, but of a system of obligations derived from these pure principles when applied to the experience of human nature in general.

In addition, moral metaphysics mainly provides universal basis for popular moral philosophy, and here it involves a very important concept in Kant's moral philosophy system, that is, the categorical imperative. In contrast to hypothetical commands, categorical commands do not depend on any assumptions. Hypothetical orders often set preconditions,

such as that a businessman must follow market rules in order to win the favor of consumers. This is clearly a conditional directive in which the behavior involved is a means to achieve a particular goal or to satisfy a desire. In contrast, the moral laws proposed by Kant exhibit the qualities of objectivity, absoluteness, and unconditionality, which are imperatives independent of the agent's personal desires. Because of this, categorical imperatives are universal and instruct the general public to act independently of personal experience in following them. In addition, Kant also made some discussions on self-discipline and heteronomy in his own moral system, which played an important role in proposing and understanding the concept of freedom.

### 4. The Critique of Practical Rationality

The Critique of Practical Reason focuses on two major issues: the possibility of freedom and the foundation of the categorical Imperative. Kant regards self-discipline as the supreme rule of morality, and in this perspective, free will is equivalent to the will to obey morality. When the subjective behavior standards of the individual coincide with the objective moral standards of the society, it marks the improvement of the individual moral accomplishment. [3] Although good will can stimulate the positive motivation of individuals, it is not enough to ensure the consistency of subjective and objective moral rules. However, freedom, which is closely linked to the subjective code of conduct of the individual and the objective moral code of society, can serve as a bridge between the two [4]. This is because the principle of self-regulation not only embodies the relationship between freedom and morality, it is also the key to connecting the two.

Highly disciplined individuals have strong self-judgment and independent choice ability, which promotes their behavior from passive to active, so as to achieve true autonomy and freedom. In addition, individuals are both rational and emotional, which means that in addition to the laws of reason, the laws of nature also have a significant influence on their moral behavior. Kant once said, "There are two things which, the more frequently and persistently we contemplate, the more they fill our hearts with a growing awe and admiration: the vastness of the starry sky above us, and the unwavering moral law within us." As limited rational beings, man is subject to the interwoven influence of two laws. On the one hand, as finite beings of nature, we have to follow the laws of nature, which is an inviolable and inevitable path; on the other hand, as beings possessing reason, we should guide our actions according to the laws of reason. Kant pointed out that the law of reason, the moral law (moral law), is a principle that we should follow but can not always follow. This "should" lies at the heart of the moral law, which guides how we should and should not behave in our daily practice. Kant makes it clear that there are, in fact, pure moral laws which, entirely independent of empirical motives (such as the pursuit of happiness), inborn dictate the rules of conduct and renunciations of a universal rational being. Moral law, as a transcendental existence, is the cornerstone of guiding People's Daily moral behavior. Even ordinary people subconsciously recognize the call of this law. Although they may not be clearly aware of the specific content of moral law, it invisibly dominates people's moral judgment and becomes

the fundamental standard or yardstick for people to measure whether their behavior is right or wrong. Secondly, Kant goes on to explain that the essence of moral principles is the law of practice, which is binding on the will of all rational beings. "The principle of practice is a proposition containing the general determinacy of the will, which in its category derives practical rules. If a condition is only considered by the subject to be valid for his will, then such principles are subjective, and the sense may be called criteria; If, however, the condition is regarded as being objective, that is, valid to the will of all rational beings, then such principles become objective or practical laws." [5] In other words, moral principles can serve either as subjective criteria valid for the will of individuals or as objective practical laws universally applicable to the will of all rational beings. In practice, rational individuals can choose moral law and good will as guides to action, which are both expressions of self-discipline and pathways to freedom.

### 5. The Realistic Value of Kant's Moral Philosophy

Kant's moral philosophy, as an important theoretical system in the history of western ethics, not only has a profound impact in the academic field, but also shows its irreplaceable value in real life. At its core lies the "moral law," a universal and inevitable moral code that is not influenced by personal feelings, desires, or experiences, an idea that has many practical implications for modern society.

Firstly, Kant's moral philosophy emphasizes the autonomy and dignity of the individual. For Kant, the principle that each person should be seen as an end, not a means, has an important place in modern ethics and human rights theory. In business, it reminds us to respect the dignity of our employees, customers and partners and not to see them as mere tools for profit. For example, when formulating labor policies, companies should consider the working environment and welfare of employees, rather than just pursuing economic benefits. This respect for the dignity of the individual helps to build more harmonious and just social relations.

Secondly, it plays a leading role in firmly establishing the socialist concept of honor and disgrace. In our traditional Chinese culture, the "four dimensions and eight virtues" is the most basic moral code, the standard of living, and the guarantee of social harmony. However, in recent decades, the social atmosphere of the supremacy of money has become rampant, and our traditional moral concepts have been destroyed to pieces, and social morals have declined rapidly, human beings are indifferent and profit-oriented. Although the material life is getting richer, people's happiness is getting lower and lower. Therefore, in order to adjust and integrate the possible negative effects of moral consciousness, it is particularly important to absorb some moral norms and principles left by predecessors on the basis of adhering to the management mechanism of strengthening external object control (such as publicity and education) and internal subject control (self-education), and establishing the correct direction of public opinion. The ultimate pursuit of Kant's moral philosophy lies in exploring the way of man, revealing the moral "law" that guides human behavior, and shaping the moral personality that reaches the state of "supreme good". Under the background of building a harmonious socialist

society and advocating the "Eight honors and eight disgraces" socialist view of honor and disgrace, these profound insights still have enlightenment significance and practical value that cannot be ignored.

Finally, Kant's moral philosophy provides important guidance for modern science and technology ethics. With the rapid development of artificial intelligence, bioengineering and other technologies, a series of ethical problems follow. Kant's categorical imperative, "act only according to what you wish to be a universal law," provides a framework for thinking about whether the application of these new technologies is ethical. In the field of artificial intelligence, for example, decisions should respect the privacy and dignity of users, rather than simply serving commercial interests or national security. This helps to ensure that the development of technology does not undermine the fundamental interests of humanity.

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