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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A CRITIQUE OF KANT'S PRACTICAL RATIONALITY

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Abstract

Practical rationality is the rationality which becomes a norm for man. And for the purpose of this work rationality is taken in relation to a community of persons or society or state not simply a single person. Practical rationality is normative since it directs people to choose the most rational and reasonable moral options in order to organize themselves as a rational moral community. It aims at a practical goal. It articulates in a suitable manner all that is necessary to make a community take the most rational decisions and choices for social cooperation. Granted practical rationality gives a community the norms of organizing themselves, it is not instrumental rationality, which aims solely in achieving a particular goal in life or a particular good. Rather, practical rationality sets a community on a practical rational foundation upon which the community can organize its citizen in most rational manner. We adopt theoretical analysis in our exposition.

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Introduction:-

This work will take a critique of Immanuel Kant on practical rationality. In it, the work examines how Kant turned around practical rationality accusing his predecessors like Thomas Hobbes, Jean Jacques Rousseau and David Hume of failure to find morality on a strong base. For Kant, passions, sentiments are precarious. Kant's greatest legacy to philosophy is his tenacity on the dignity of the human person. For him, the moral subject is an autonomous subject who obeys only the dictates of his own will, when this has passed the universality test. The denial of the moral subject of particular desires, passions and interests, in Kant's view makes the subject free but this freedom based on pure rationality, does it not deny Kant's morality of content and wholeness?

Its etymology comes from the Latin word ratio, reor, ratus. It means reckoning, an accounting, calculating or computation. It means procedure. It can mean method as expressed in Latin Dictionary (Lewis and Short, 1956). Rationality also refers to the faculty of the mind which forms the basis of computation and calculation as such it is a mental activity like judgment, understanding and reasoning.

Ancient Greek philosophers especially Plato and Aristotle saw man as a rational animal – zoon legon econ -. An animal set apart from other creatures by capacities for speech and deliberations. For both philosophers, rationality involves the capacity to give account. The capacity of abstraction belongs to man. The capacity of calculation, judgment and making inferences belong to man because of his speech and abstraction.

Cicero used the Greek word logos for rational and logos designates logic, discourse, word. With this, many philosophers combined the sense of ratio and logos for rationality. These form the basic foundation for the philosophical concept of rationality. Philosophers see it as a relational discourse in intelligence. Thus, rationality

means dialogue, argumentation which gives explanation and provides justification. We have adopted theoretical analysis as the method for us in exposing Kant.

Review of Literature:-

In this, considerations will be giving to the following: Hobbes, Rousseau and Hume. Thomas Hobbes was one of the systematic British political philosophers. Hobbes proposed a typical political theory based on the coercive power of a sovereign. His attempt to justify this underlies his idea of rationality. Human nature is the bases of his theory and this must be understood and explained in par with any other natural phenomena. This is hinged on his belief that the law of physics can equally be applied to the explanation of the circumstances of human life. Thoughts, feelings and states of consciousness are by-products of the physiological movements of the body. Their primary function is to sustain the life of the organism and help it to avert pain or death. Hence, he says in *Leviathan* “this notion which is appetite and for the appearance of it, delights and pleasure seemeth to be a corroboration of vital notion and a help there unto (Hobbes,1968).

The basis of this claim is that human nature as Hobbes calls it, is a state of war where each person is against the other, motivated by the spirit of self-preservation. Each individual according to Hobbes acts in a self-seeking way, and the converging lives of self-interest make life an endless and intolerable battle ground. It is man’s insatiability that occasioned this warfare which Hobbes famously summarized as “*Homo homini lupus*” – man is a wolf to another man.

To escape from this perpetual war and violence, individuals motivated by self-interest, agree to a social contract whereby a common power is established to safeguard individual life and interest. This central power is designated as the powerful sovereign. The sovereignty is the guarantee to the compliance to laws of nature. By a law of nature, Hobbes means ‘a precept or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do, that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same; and to omit, that, by which he thinketh may be best preserved (Hobbes, 1968).

In summary, this brief study of Hobbes leaves important legacy to modernity. He re-interprets the concept of human nature contrary to the classical notion. In this view, man becomes a free and self-determining subject, who fixes his own values. As a consequence, he destroys the concept of objective values and common final good for human nature. No external criteria should justify or motivate human action. Man is always free to question any authority who threatens his basic liberty of self-preservation.

Jean Jacques Rousseau interest is the rationality underlying his famous social contract theory. He started from human nature and revolutionized its meaning. He was dissatisfied with the rationality behind Hobbes’ theory. Hobbes did not find the true basis for social life. Self-interest cannot establish a stable society in his opinion. For Rousseau, nature is fundamentally good and consequently human beings possess a natural goodness from the moment of birth. He says that only the society corrupts man. Hence, the first line of social contract says “*L’homme est ne’ libre, et par tout il est dans les fers*” meaning “man is free from birth, but is in chains everywhere (Rousseau, 1943).

Human beings, Rousseau says, have an equal capacity and interest in freedom. A fundamental problem arises as to how to “find a form of association that defends and protects the person and goods of each associate with all the common force, and by means of which each one, uniting with all, nevertheless, obeys only himself and remains as free as before” (Rousseau, 1943).

To preserve common interest, Rousseau proposed a society in which each member puts his person and all his power in common, under the supreme direction of the general will. For Rousseau, human nature becomes a source of goodness indispensable for a good society. The questions remain can general will achieve a generally acknowledged freedom and not degenerate into despotism.

David Hume based his theory on the constitution of universal human nature of human society as such. He hinges his moral theory on human passions, sentiments. Morality, for Hume, is normative and reason has no determinant function to play in this regard. He says thus “since morals, therefore, have an influence upon the actions and upon the affections it follows that they cannot be derived from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already proved, can never have any influence; morals excite passions, and procure or prevent actions. Reason of itself is

utterly impotent in this particular. The rule of morality therefore, is not conclusions of our reasons... As long as it allowed, that reason has no influence on our passions and actions, it is in vain to pretend, that morality is discovered only by a deduction of reason” (Hume 1888). He maintains that what moves us to action is the desire of the pleasure and fear of the pains which we foresee by reasoning. It is not the reasoning concerning causes and effects which moves us to action.

Morality is about human action and not speculation or theories of fact or rational deductions. Hume felt that human passions are shared by all human beings, and instead of concentrating on the egoistic self-preservation of Hobbes or the return to the primitive human nature of Rousseau, he chose human sympathy, which characterizes humanity. He left unanswered the issue of human autonomy and he equally downplayed the importance of reason.

Immanuel Kant on Practical Rationality

Ekennia like other thinkers see practical rationality is normative since it directs people to choose the most rational and reasonable moral options in order to organize themselves as a rational moral community. We can now take a closer at Immanuel Kant and his comments. Kant insists that morality is a matter of principles that is rationality based on purely universal terms through consistent thinking. Hence he says ‘the sole aim of the present Groundwork is to seek out and establish the supreme principle of morality’ (Kant, 1964). He highlights that, the principle underlying any proposed action must be such that we can universalize it without contradiction. A will operating on this principle would be free from any ground of determination in nature, and hence truly free (Kant, 1956).

The Foundations of Kant’s Moral Theory

Kant upholds that the morally right was the rational involving the application of universal principles to conduct. Within Kant’s moral philosophy, we have Augustinian goodwill (*bona voluntas*); Plato’s notion that moral concepts are pure, rational non empirical ideas, and Aristotle’s idea of a final end (*telos*) (Riley, 1986). Thus Kant’s moral philosophy stands on the tripod of these philosophies. Kant’s distinction between the world of sense ‘phenomenon’ and the world of understanding ‘noumenon’ follow strictly Plato’s division of two worlds: ‘natural world’ and ‘world of ideas’.

Based on this, for Kant, a rational being has two points of view from which he can regard himself and recognize the laws of the exercise of his faculties. As part of the world of sense, man automatically finds himself subject to the laws of nature. As part of the intelligible world, whose laws are independent of nature and they have their foundation not in experience but in reason alone (Kant, 1964). Kant borrows the notion of final end from Aristotle – an end which is more than a means. Be it as it may, Aristotle’s end is considered too dogmatic by Kant (Kant, 1952). Kant insists that the only knowable objective ends are moral ones, of which the supreme end or good is the respect of persons. Thus, he declares that persons are ends who ought never to be used as means.

In contradistinction to Augustine’s ‘freedom of will’, Kant regards the will as an uncaused causality, a moral cause, an undetermined power of spontaneous self-determinations. It is an auto-determination, which endows the individual with the capacity to determine himself to action through what ought to be his duty.

Moral Principles of Kant

The job of Kant is to discover universal moral principles whereby, by our acting in obedience to these principles we fulfill our moral duty. These must be strictly universal and inviolable. These principles are applicable to all rational beings without exception. These principles are deducted by reason which carry with them moral commands or duty. Kant calls them categorical imperative.

Man is a rational being and only a rational being has the capacity of acting according to principles. Each person according to Kant is capable of being conscious of moral principles and applying them in concrete situations. Man is fully autonomous given the fact of reason. Being rational beings, all persons are equal in Kant’s view. Individuals should therefore treat one another as equals. By the fact of rationality, Kant takes man as having an absolute value, consequently, any rational being, no matter where he finds himself deserves the same respect.

On moral imperatives, Kant speaks of hypothetical imperative and categorical imperative. Hypothetical imperative commands conditionally. ‘A hypothetical imperative is accordingly a rule of action that does not pretend to universal validity but admits of exceptions (Reiner, 1983).

Categorical imperative commands absolutely neither to do an action nor to refrain from doing an action. 'A categorical imperative expresses a necessitation and a strict practical necessity or obligation' (Kant, 1964).

Categorical imperative does not only command absolutely, it is also an objective principle which must be universally valid (Kant, 1956). It is global nature springs from the fact that it derives from reason and holds a priori for all rational beings. The first formulation of Kant's categorical imperative reads thus: 'act only on that principle through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law' (Kant, 1964). The cornerstone of the categorical imperative is the dignity and autonomy of persons which is manifested in the importance and recognition of respect for persons. Without respect for persons, categorical imperative has no meaning. What Kant commands is that every rational being sees each person as an end, and that he has the duty to see others as ends.

Conclusion:-

Immanuel Kant's profound importance in moral philosophy is his insistence on the dignity of the human person. In his understanding, the subject is autonomous who obeys only the dictates of his own will, when it has passed universality test. All moral agents are equal and deserve of the same respect. But Kant gives the moral subject the power to discern moral principles alone. The moral subject is the abstraction of humanity present in each person, and that such decisions of each moral subject must be accepted by other moral subjects. Kant does not foresee any arbitrariness since the subject satisfies the principle that you always treat humanity as an end. This in religious understanding points to a supreme being with omniscience ability since it cannot be identified with any real person. On the respect for others as ends in themselves, the basis is on the respect the subject regards himself. As a result, the other is there as a point of reference, as a justification for the test of universality of moral principles. The issue of inter-subjectivity is put to question. Kant's concept of person and rationality as a subject with formal autonomy, guided by abstract rationality is rejected. There should be real dialogue among real persons and culture, not just mere ghost of abstraction or imposition of universal principles from a particular culture on others. We must on the other hand, appreciate the problem of Kant who is a true child of the enlightenment period. This period placed emphasis on the emancipation of man from all determinations of culture, tradition, religion and ideologies. Thus Kant felt the only way to achieve autonomy and freedom for man, is through rational abstraction by human reason. Hence, to derive practical rationality from a universalizable principle, in the manner of Kant without real dialogue with other moral subjects may not do justice to all that would be affected by the judgment. Thus there is need for real dialogue among those involved in such a society or state.

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