

CRITICISM OF KANTIAN ETHICS

Kant taught that an act is absolutely wrong if it is an act you cannot imagine everybody doing. For example, one murder is wrong for if everybody murdered we would all be destroyed. It worries about motives and intentions. It is an ethic that tries to avoid the need for a God to make moral demands.

The intuition argument

Many believers hold that the only justification for the Deontologism system is intuition. That is, we feel that stealing is wrong even when it is for a greater good and it has nothing to do with it being bad example or a threat to order. Stealing is bad because it is bad and not because of what it does. They usually insist that bad consequences come from the act itself being bad. The consequences don't however make the act bad. Some people have an intuition that they should steal from the rich to give to the poor or because the rich deserve to be robbed. Intuition is no good as a guide.

The question is then how do you know that the act is bad? Stealing can sometimes have very good consequences. If the consequences don't make the act bad, then it follows that they don't matter and only the act matters. If you can't consider the consequences then you cannot know if the act is bad. It's all about an assumption that one pretends is intuition. Its not reason.

Some people have different intuitions. Atheists may intuit that religion and belief in God is evil and believers in God claim to intuit that belief in God is good.

The way the intuition theory works is as follows. You want to do good when you act. You intuit that stealing is wrong. When you follow that intuition and avoid stealing and prevent it then you are doing good.

Prichard, a deontologist, says that that it is impossible for reason to prove that any act is bad in itself (Deontologism, New Catholic Encyclopaedia). If this is the case then it is feeling that is behind the belief that any act is wrong. You feel an act wrong and that is why you claim to believe that it is wrong.

Deontologism insists that we should do things out of sense of duty when reason tells us what our duty is and not because of feeling. We are to do good not to be happy though we can hope to be happy because of it. We are to do it for being good it is simply to be valued. Doing good for its own sake is thought to mean that deontologism and Kant want you to hate doing good. It is open to that but it is clear that you should do good and not wait until you hate it enough before doing it. It has to be practical. Also, Kant taught that wanting to do something does not mean you do it because you want to.

Kant is clear that it is wrong to do something because you desire to and not for its own sake.

But that is not what can happen. We only do good because we feel like it. Deontologism thrives on what it forbids and so it condemns itself. If we are honest we know that we can only concentrate on one thing at a time and this forces us to follow the strongest desire we have every moment. If you resist a sexual temptation, you succeed because you felt you wanted to overcome it rather than entertain it. The reason we can have strong desires and not carry them out is because the desire to do something in a moment is replaced by one that stops this. So deontologism is unintelligible. It is bigotry to make faith in morality and what it is rest on feeling. Such faith is not faith at all. So they don't really believe in their philosophy. And moreover intuition and reason both tell us we should not do anything we don't believe is right so the duty must be not to believe in the duties of deontologism.

The doctrine of deontologism despite itself forbids our motives, meaning our desires for good and good is what brings benefits for ourselves or others. The doctrine says we are not to desire good or to have a motive but just do something because we ought to. If you do good because you enjoy it your motive is bad. You are doing the good not because it is good or because you ought to but because of your feelings. It is the ought the doctrine cares about not the feelings. It is cold. It is worse than altruism, the nasty doctrine that people don't matter in themselves and should just think about helping others and not themselves. The two are combined in many ways making a complete monster.

Arbitrary

The Kantians are inconsistent and they concoct arbitrary precepts. If it is immoral to lie to save a life then it is wrong to be silent at all for if everybody did that life would be a disaster.

And if everybody steals and lies we will survive. The ethic devises and then increases misery by forbidding these always and then it says misery is bad which is why the thing is wrong. It is incoherent.

The ethic assumes that when you do something you have to approve of all others doing the same to you and to others. A thief, for instance, can argue that if he steals nobody should do the same for it is wrong. But he cannot mean it because he believes in doing it himself. He approves of the theft as he does it and is thinking it is right regardless of what he thought before or thinks after. The thief could argue that since he is more sure of his existence than that of other people that he cannot approve of them stealing from him but can agree will stealing from them and stealing from others.

Some object against Kant that people can wash their hair every week and that does not mean they are declaring that it would be wrong for everybody else not to. Others would reply that this is about preference not morality so it doesn't touch Kant's theory of morality. It does for preferences mean you desire what is good and anything to do with good or bad is to do with morality. So the objection does have a point.

In a book called *Philosophy: The Basics* we read that rules like always poking your tongue out at people who are taller than you are could be universalised which makes Kant's system ridiculous.

We have to perform the greatest good and the least evil because values often conflict so the least important one has to be sacrificed. It could be that if you have to tell a lie to save your sister from an axe-wielding maniac then you should go ahead and do it. Those who condemn your action should be sharply informed that they are just trying to commit cold-blooded murder through you. You would be as bad as the axe-murderer for telling the truth.

Life after death

If the Kantian ethic were rational it would be on one condition, that there is a life after death. Unless you can be as sure that you will live forever as you are that you are alive now the ethic would be irrational for you for how else could you justify obedience to it for it is difficult and nightmarish and you'd need a good afterlife to make living worthwhile? For instance, telling the truth cannot be a duty when you could increase happiness by doing the opposite. And you should do the opposite for all have only one life. You need another life to make up for the misery caused by following Kant's ethics.

Suicide

Perhaps we would be better off committing suicide? The Kantian theory says that we must not. It forbids killing yourself even if all the people around you kill themselves.

It is no help to tell a suicidal person, "You cannot kill yourself. What if everybody did that?" The answer you will get is, "But I am not everybody!" The ethic would demand you say that but it is clear that it shows no mercy or concern for the person. Why not try to understand the person instead and listen?

Impersonal and Cold

Despite itself, the ethic forbids compassionate actions for you do good only because it is your duty and not to end suffering. It is a rigid impersonal rule.

The rule must be supremely important. If a rule can authorise you to let the whole world die if the only way to save it was by telling a lie then the rule is the most important thing. Life is nothing in comparison. Since life doesn't matter so much as the rule, then anybody who doesn't believe in the rule must surely be put to death? But then the rule says you cannot kill. True. But it is still forcing you to put little value on human life. It still gives you a black heart. You are not killing just because of the rule and not because you value human life.

It tells us to tell the truth, when lying is the only alternative, no matter how many people will be destroyed as a result. If you have to tell a killer where his intended victim is rather than tell him a lie, Kant would say that it is the killer's decision to kill not yours. Your affair is the choice whether to lie or not. He says you cannot tell a lie just because somebody else will abuse the truth. It's not your problem. A philosophy like that only trains people to deny that they have a part to play in what other people do. If somebody murders because of what you told him, you have to answer for it. You caused evil.

Kantian philosophy says that we must treat people as ends and never ever as means. This forbids masturbation, porn or casual sex outside marriage. But if we just care about acting without feeling and only out of a sense of duty then it is the duty we really only care about. Acting with feelings would be preferable to that – it would be nearer to what the person wants.

Kant said that you must do the right thing not to be happy but because it is the right thing. He said that morality however

should result in you becoming happy or happier. But if it should that does not mean it will. You can give up an organ for your child and endure a life of Hell afterwards. Do not let Kant's assertion blind you to the fact that the ethics is cold and unfeeling in itself. Cold people think they feel better by being cold. They do it because they don't want the hassle of caring about others. His teaching about happiness is unimportant.

The pope talks about Kant's poor idea of love

Thinking of the command to love one's neighbour as oneself, Pope John Paul II wrote, "Love for a person excludes the possibility of treating him as an object of pleasure. This is a principle of Kantian ethics. Kant did not fully interpret the commandment of love. In fact, the commandment of love is not limited to excluding all behaviour that reduces the person to a mere object of pleasure. It requires more; it requires the affirmation of a person as a person " (page 201, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, John Paul II, Jonathan Cape, London, 1994).

Kantians are clear that we must not treat people as a means to our own ends. But what about treating them as means to some other end such as pleasing God or scoring points with him? What if we treat them as a means not to our ends but to moral ends such as justice and love? You can love a person. You can love a person for the sake of love which is not the same as real love. Its about thinking you love them and your motive is to satisfy a rule.

Kant and God

Kant's ethics is offered to us as a secular ethic. It does not consider God at all in terms of a moral authority. In other words, it offers God as a help to be moral but not as a moral authority.

In the Kant scenario, God, if he exists, made us not for ourselves but for goodness. He does not care about us. And nobody should care according to the Kant ethic. Just care about duty not people. Misery is the reward of such an ethic though it says that good consequences will come out of its teaching though it should not be obeyed for them.

At least Kantian ethics say that ethics is not based on what a God decrees but on what reason says is right. It is godless system. It is duty that matters in it not God or God's will.

Objection:

Kant said we need to work to bring about the greatest good we can - the greatest good is what he meant by the *summum bonum*. He argued that we can obtain it but only if God assists us (page 61, *Philosophy of Religion for A Level*, OCR Edition (Anne Jordan, Neil Lockyer and Edwin Tate, Nelson Thornes Ltd, 1999)). He said it would not be a duty to strive for it if it is impossible and a lesser good would have to do.

He assumed that it must be God that helps. He went as far as to say that if we fail to do the greatest good in life we may get the chance from God in an afterlife. But he merely asserted it is God - he did not defend or argue for it. And the point he was trying to make would still hold good if he said there is something that against all odds that makes you do what is really difficult. Our natural abilities can work in surprising ways. God is not essential to his morality but is merely shoved in as an assumption. It does not change the fact that his moral system really has no need for God. Also, we need a morality for this world. Anybody telling us that if we cannot do great good in this world that we have the next one anyway to do it is denying this. If you say you need help to do the greatest good and you are bound to do it in this world then clearly the next life has nothing to do with it. The morality is no good if it is not about the here and now.

Kant said it is morally necessary to assume that there is a God (page 63, *Philosophy of Religion for A Level*, OCR Edition (Anne Jordan, Neil Lockyer and Edwin Tate, Nelson Thornes Ltd, 1999)). But God is too serious a matter to be merely assumed. It is like assuming that the person you will love above all else is in the cellar though you know nothing about the cellar. A morality cannot be based on assuming the existence of something so important for that is trivialising it.

Kant thought is morally necessary to assume that there is a God because once you say that moral interests matter more than anything else you are saying there is something beyond anything human that must be obeyed (page 63, *Philosophy of Religion for A Level*, OCR Edition (Anne Jordan, Neil Lockyer and Edwin Tate, Nelson Thornes Ltd, 1999)). A command to put a principle first can only come from a commander - God. Suppose you like chocolate. What matters more than anything else is eating it in a way that helps you enjoy it best. You cannot eat it until you get sick for example. You cannot eat it all the time or it will start to bore you. None of that implies that a command is needed. Morality can be understood as getting the best out of what is. You have to get something out of it so why not the best? The reason you act is because you have to not because you are commanded.

God is that which must be our only ultimate concern as he is the only perfect goodness. Kantian ethics then has the attitude, "Maybe that kind of God exists but damn him. We will work out our ethics on our own regardless of him or his goodness.

We will assume God as a prop to encourage ethical behaviour." The ethics of Kant then to Christians are humanistic and satanic. It is a case of man being ethical to all but God. Kant's ethics is anti-God in that sense. It would be a fake ethic if there is a God. If it is true that God is the only thing that ultimately matters then the ethics is unethical for it calls on man to defy God who really matters to man. And if it is not God that matters but believing in him then that makes it worse.

It could be that Kantian ethics is the best of a selection of poor ethical theories. Maybe all you have is poor theories and it is all you will ever have. That belief in God tries to rule Kantianism out if it is the best shows that that belief is a plague and worthy of revulsion. If it is the best, then belief in God is certainly an evil. The good it does can never make up for the errors and harm it produces.

Problems with the ethics

Atheists and humanists agree with the ethics in many things. They tend to dissent where Kant's ethics asks us to avoid lying even if lying is necessary to save a person's life.

The Catholic Church says that contraceptive sex is lying even in marriage and especially in marriage. If the Kantian agreed with that, he would be against contraception. He would argue that the state though it cannot stop lying from going on, it can stop contraception and therefore should.

The ethic is so impersonal and mathematical that it is bad for mental and emotional health. In this it annuls itself for we cannot live if we destroy our mental and emotional health and so it condemns itself.

You cannot amend the rule of Kant to, "Doing the least evil is always right", for that is a different kind of ethic altogether, consequentialism. Yet some say that morality is doing what has the fewest elements which are bad in themselves in it. So, though stealing is bad in itself it is lawful to do it to prevent murder for that is an act that is worse. This still says only what consequentialism says.

If any lying implies that everybody should be allowed to tell all the lies they want as Kantianism states then it follows that all wrongdoing is incredibly serious and cynical and callous. The system will destroy through guilt.

If we really want to get along with other people, we simply cannot worry about moral ends or God! Morality and religion and God when correctly understood are blocks to caring about others - really and truly and deeply.

Positive law and permissive law

A positive law is one that tells you to do something. Its reverse is a permissive law that merely lets you do it. Kantian ethics commands you to tell the truth if hypothetically it will guarantee that millions will die for a lie is the only alternative. It makes it a positive law. You are no better than a mass murderer in principle with a law like that! It is bad for the reason that commanding old people to be euthanised differs from permitting them to take that course.

Finally

Kantian ethics tries to value the person but fails. It is slow burner destruction. Kant's categorical imperative unjustly accuses the wrongdoer of being very bad for by his action he is saying, "Everybody do the same."

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