

## KANTIAN ETHICS - THE NOTION THAT RULES NOT CONSEQUENCES MATTER

### Key Points

The book *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Ethics* is our source for Kant's ethical teachings.

According to Kant, ethics must be worked out only in accordance with the principles of reason. Genuine morality is derived solely from correct reason.

Reason examines and refers to ends and means. The end is the end goal and the means are how you try to bring the goal about.

### The imperatives

An imperative is something we have to do to achieve an end.

Kant believed in two imperatives.

One is the hypothetical imperative. For example, if I want to visit Thailand I have to get transport there.

The other is the categorical imperative. Categorical means follow and obey unconditionally. Imperative means its your duty to obey it. In other words, there are actions we must do without regard for the consequences and they are to be recognised and seen as morally good.

For Kant, if you have to tell a tiny lie in order to stop a truly evil man unleashing a chemical weapon on the world that will make people die a death terrible beyond belief this philosophy says you must not tell the lie for the lie is your responsibility and the cruel murders are the man's.

Most people feel that as scary as that is he is right so they set about inventing an "ethics" of their own so that they can go into denial mode.

We should only make moral rules that could be applied to everybody. If everybody murdered we would be all dead so that to Kant proves that murder of even one person is wrong. So when deciding what is right you must ask, "Is this something everybody on earth could do?"

The categorical imperative includes the thought that we must never treat people as means but as ends. It is thought that Jesus supported that principle when he said, "Always treat others the way you would like them to treat you." But the reality is that you have to treat people as means if you are to live in the world. And what if many people are happy to be treated as a means at least up to a point? And they are!

Kant correctly thought the Golden Rule, treat others as you would like to be treated, is very weak. His categorical imperative is definitely an improvement on it.

### Intentions

When we do evil, it is the good we think we see in the evil or the good results that we are after. We only do evil because we misperceive it as good. We might categorise it as evil when we do it but we don't really mean it. Its evil doesn't seem real to us.

Kant's morality is based on human intentions only. If you had brain damage and you thought a lie was the truth then it allows lying then.

Think about this. If the morality is all about intentions then it follows that it does not really matter if the whole world cannot lie and steal all the time. It has no relevance to morality as long as the liars and thieves have good intentions or at least the best intentions under the circumstances. Thus Kantian ethics contradicts itself. It says only intent matters and then persecutes those who do things that the whole world cannot do.

What if you think that liars and thieves can never have good intentions? Actually some times they do. And to say they must always have bad intentions is very judgmental. If the whole world cannot steal or lie all the time it cannot judge all the time

either. From that it would follow that its a sin to have a morality for that entails judging actions and perhaps the people who do the actions.

If an actor dies and the question arises about what is to be done about his character on a soap? Some say a replacement would be disrespectful. They are judging the intentions of those who work to get a replacement done. Nobody has the right to do that for they cannot see the intentions of another. And they don't even know the people who are considering a recast. If an action could be seen as disrespectful it is not if it is done with the best intentions.

With Kantian ethics, a person is never morally accountable for what they did but only for why they did it. Many would say the following. This would imply that the law of the land has no right to put people on trial but only has a right to put hearts on trial which is impossible to do. The criminal would have a right to feel judged by a system that does not and cannot know or understand his intentions. That is only going to worsen the human tendency to lawlessness. Its nothing more than a licence for recidivism. And it is very effective.

Perhaps the ethic has to allow punishing people for what they have done regardless of their intentions for the law of the land punishes breaches of the law as long as the person was not forced to break the law. Ignorance or good intentions are not an excuse. But this contradicts the notion that intention alone is important and is really opposition to the ethic.

It is unfair to criticise Kantian morality for being so based on human intentions, for the following reason. Every single doctrine of morality suffers from the same fatal illness. Its called a defect to soften how devastating it is. The moral systems are pure hypocrisy for they recoil from the primacy of intention and yet they endorse it. In the midst of virtue, we are in mire of vice and selfishness and pretence.

## **Motives**

Kant according to Keith Ward in the book, *More than Matter?* (page 172, Lion, 2010), though he regarded motives as central also taught that we must beware of the fanaticism of trying to work out exactly what our motives are and how good they are. Kant said it is impossible to be sure how moral your motives are so it is best to just get on with doing good. Kant like Aristotle said it is better to get into the habit of doing good so that you don't have to worry all the time about the purity of your motives. The reason is that by the time the self-examination is done, the opportunity for doing the good deeds will have passed and besides you still won't know if your good deeds are really unselfish.

But if we are doing good out of bad motives and not realising it then the good is not really good and is not as selfless as it appears. It contradicts the emphasis on intention.

Kant meant we must not spend too much time and energy worrying about our motives but it is clear we must watch out for any clear selfishness. But if intention comes first then there is no such thing as spending too much time testing and purifying your motives.

Kant felt that we must avoid any belief such as Heaven or Hell that is going to make our motives more suspect. He is not saying they will necessarily make you more selfish but only that it makes it harder for you to clearly distinguish between selfish and unselfish motives. It may be though that the believing saint is really only concerned not about goodness but about having a good time in Heaven forever. The moral is don't overdo the self-examination - and remember it is not that it is really wrong to engage in it - but don't believe anything that will make your hidden motives more selfish.

It is all about reason so our hopes and desires and interests must not be involved. This makes the morality sound cold but Kant argues that ought implies can so we should have the benefit of doing what we ought to and can do. At least we are exercising freedom.

## **What is Duty?**

Morality is not a simple belief in good or bad but a belief in being good or else suffering punishment. It has the idea of duty built in.

Duty means doing good that you are bound to do. For example, you are required and obligated to pay your bills. Some philosophers, such as Kant, have attempted to base right and wrong on duty. Duty implies that you should be forced and that it is a duty for others to force you to carry out your duties. You cannot be required to do something if nobody tries to force you. Needless to say, Christianity and Islam say religion is a duty to God and we know from their bloody history how that led these faiths to butcher millions who didn't want any part of this duty.

Duty is debt. If you fail in your duty you are forced to pay your debt another way. For example, if you don't carry out your duty to respect the property of others you will have the duty to pay back the damage by money or by prison enforced on you. So duty is inseparable from compulsion.

A school-master who sits all day listening to the radio and who doesn't teach his pupils is not doing his duty. If he gets away with it, then society is taking the duty from him. Everybody is happy with him doing no work especially the children so it is not his duty anymore. You see then that duty attempts to justify human authority. You also see that he has to be forced by the threat of losing his job or punishment to do his duty. Without that it could hardly be said to be his duty for it is duty in name only. There is no requirement made so it is not a real duty. A requirement is not a requirement unless there are bad consequences for you if you don't do what you are required to do.

A duty is your duty whether you understand it or not. A seven year old pupil may not understand why he is obligated to work at his maths but that doesn't detract from the duty being a duty. Duty implies that we are to be conscripts in a moral army. It is inseparable from the use of force.

Duty justifies dogma. It follows from duty that nobody has the right to say you should rob banks for the poor or neglect your children. It follows that if there is a duty towards God, that doubters and atheists and agnostics should be silenced. Christianity and Islam cannot get along for each claims to be the one true faith and accordingly that it is everybody's duty to belong to the true faith and that other religions are bad and a threat to duty.

## **Duty and absolutism**

Some say that it is duty that matters not consequences so not doing your duty is to be absolutely forbidden.

Moral philosophers criticise each others theories and base that criticism on telling only what they want to tell. They never tell the full story. Neither did Kant.

Absolutism is the doctrine that some acts are morally wrong no matter how much evil avoiding them does. An example is how it teaches that it is morally wrong to kill x, even if x consents, even if it is the only way to get organs to save the lives of five lovely children. It says the acts are bad in themselves and that they are not to be condemned because of their bad consequences but simply because they are bad. It says the reason evil acts have bad results is because they are evil acts and it denies that we should say that doing whatever has the best consequences matters.

Absolutism is the strongest fan of duty. It makes things duties no matter what.

Let us explore the doctrines of people in ivory towers who claim that morality is about actions that are always wrong regardless of the evil this "morality" results in. Or who hold that only some actions are always bad and forbidden. Let us continue to explore Kant!

## **Universality**

Immanuel Kant said that an action is wrong if everybody cannot do it. For example, if we all broke promises life would be impossible so it is always wrong. You cannot break a promise even to save lives. His system is called Deontology. Deontology is an ethic about duty. But what is said about actions must be clarified. According to him an action is good if it is done with a moral motive so it is only the motive that counts and everything else including the consequences is not as important. It says that what is moral is not moral because it is good but because it was done because you believe you ought to do it. For Kant, you are a bad person if you refuse to stab people just because you hate the thought of blood.

Deontology is based on the notion that correct reason is always valid and you can work out an ethic and that any reasonable ethic must be in some sense universalizable - logically possible to apply to all cases. In other words, if stealing is wrong for me it is wrong for everybody else in the same situation and also life cannot go on if everybody does it. That seems to lead to the conclusion that to act rationally and ethically is the same thing for both reason and ethics are universalizable. In other words, the conclusion is that reason tells us to have an ethic that can and is meant to be practiced by the whole world and what that ethic would be like.

The trouble is, as Peter Singer says (page 319, Practical Ethics) – not to mention the great David Hume, is that that we can behave rationally and still be wrong. Rationality is not about being right though it is an attempt to be right but is about deriving conclusions from premises. So you could make a mistake and the result will be a wrong belief. But it is still a rational belief in the sense that you used reason correctly as you understood reason or what you thought was the facts to come to a conclusion. Objectively speaking, your mistake is irrational but subjectively speaking it is rational. It is the subjective sense that is important for it is to be equated with sincerity and there is no sense in being right if you don't sincerely think you are right.

The ethic declares some unimportant actions immoral and permits things that are very bad. The ethic makes it immoral to borrow. Life cannot go on if everybody steals but neither can it if all borrow everything. (Interestingly, life cannot function

if we all say miracles happen every day. This makes the Roman Catholic Church immoral for encouraging belief in miracles.) It is logically possible to demand that everybody say a silent prayer at 3 am daily. But that does not make it a moral duty!

The doctrine of Kant is telling us we must not shun the forbidden acts because of consequences but because of what they are. The undesirable consequences are put down to the acts being bad but are not the reason they are bad. It would say that killing is not wrong because of what will happen but killing is wrong because it is killing. See how it is rooted in the present.

Kant himself believed that since nobody agrees on what is best for us in terms of consequences it is necessary to forget about the consequences and just focus on motives for that is the only way you can enable all people to be moral if they want to be and they can want to be. Consequences are extremely important to us in our daily thinking which is why Kant's morality is irrational in the sense that it is suggesting or worse imposing an ethic nobody wants.