

Kant: Duty-based Ethics

“There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a *good will*.”

What does it mean for something to be good without qualification?

Good “not because of what it effects or accomplishes, nor because of its fitness to attain some proposed end; it is good only through its willing, i.e., it is good in itself.”

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Other things *seem* like they might be 'good in themselves'.

Courage

Generosity

Wealth

Comfort

Why might these things fail to be good without qualification?

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What *is* the good will?

This turns out to be the central aim of Kant's book. If we can understand what he means by the 'good will', then we can understand the main idea behind his ethical theory.

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Question: What is the function of our faculty of reason?

Proposed answer: To promote our happiness!

Kant rejects this answer. He thinks that there are much better ways to achieve happiness than to cultivate our faculty of reason.

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Question: What is the function of our faculty of reason?

“[E]xistence has another and much more worthy purpose, for which, and not for happiness, reason is quite properly intended and which must, therefore, be regarded as the supreme condition to which the private purpose of men must, for the most part, defer.” (p. 9)

We are meant to be more than just happy. We are meant to be *good*.

So how do we know what it means to be good, and how to we cultivate a good will?

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According to Kant, there are four ways that our behavior can relate to duty:

1. It can be opposed to duty.
2. It can be in accordance with duty, but performed for other reasons entirely.
3. It can be in accordance with duty, where we recognize and do it because it is what's required, but where we also have other inclinations at work.
4. It can be performed “from duty”, where we have no inclination whatsoever to do it other than the fact that it is out duty.

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Question: How am I supposed to know what my duty is?

I can't rely on my feelings and intuitions exclusively, because these can lead me astray. I must rely on *a priori* reason.

A priori knowledge is knowledge that we obtain without any experience. It is the sort of thing that we can know no matter what kind of life we have lived.

Does this mean that I have to study and do philosophy for years and years to know what my duty is???

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THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

Maxim: A rule for guiding action

Universal law: A law that applies to all persons, at all times

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THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE (practical version)

Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.

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Benefits of Kantian ethics:

The Challenge from Prudence: Since we're meant to be more than just happy, the fact that our moral requirements will sometimes make us unhappy shouldn't bother us.

Nietzsche: Our moral concepts are not arbitrary, if we form them in the proper way. If we rely exclusively on reason to form our moral principles, they will have some objective, *a priori* justification.

Cultural Relativism: Since the Categorical Imperative focuses on universal laws, the principles it generates will be applicable to all persons, in all cultures, at all times.

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Problems for Kantian ethics:

1. What if we're not very good at reasoning? Are we supposed to rely on someone else to help us determine what to do? If so, who?
2. Should we really make our moral decisions without taking our feelings into account. Doesn't that seem a little cold?
3. Kant is ready to allow that sticking to the Categorical Imperative can sometimes bring about bad results. How can I be doing the 'right thing' if it brings about a bad result?
4. The Categorical Imperative sounds a little ridiculous. It seems that there are some things that it prohibits that are obviously morally permissible.