

Did Kant get Morality Right or Wrong?

You get the picture

So:
what did he say?

'The only thing that is good in itself is the Good Will'

This was because he was a Rationalist thinker

The rationalists believed that morality:

1. Is a type of metaphysical knowledge
2. It is implanted in our minds by God
3. It can be discovered by reason, because it deduces general principles about human nature

So morality is a kind of 'faculty' in our brains.

- Which makes moral statements special: they are **synthetic a priori** –

A priori because we can't prove what people should do by looking – we find their truth in the mind, through reason.

Synthetic because they may be true or false.

These are the basics you must know:

1. Goodness is IN THE WILL – not in inclination, emotion, love or compassion

2. That is why Kant's theory is deontological (duty-based) – goodness is duty, and duty is to use the will to obey the moral law

3. The Law is found in the moral 'ought', in the difference between:

Categorical Imperatives

And

Hypothetical Imperatives

Hypothetical Imperatives usually take the form 'if ... then ...', e.g.

If you want to be happy

Then go bungee jumping!

Categorical Imperatives have nothing to do with making you happy

Do not murder

Keep your promises

Do not steal

These are **absolute commands** regardless of your wishes

4. Thus **Goodness is about actions, not consequences.** Even if you end up getting the right result, if you do it for the wrong reason, the action is bad (and so are you!).

If I put LSD in the nation's tap water, it might make a lot of people very happy, but very few would see it as a good action.....

5. So Categorical Imperatives are **absolute** rules that can never be disobeyed to achieve a better end.

- And they are **prescriptive**

- And obedience to them must be a **free choice** of the will – otherwise it is not a *good will*.

6. There are 3 tests for CIs

1. universalisability

2. **Treating humans as ends in themselves**

3. **Acting as if you live in a kingdom of ends**

7. Kant is thus painting a picture of **intrinsic (built-in) good** as opposed to **instrumental good** (good as a means to an end).

A quick summary of these 7 points

- 1. Good will
- 2. Duty
- 3. to the CI
- 4. Shown in:
actions not
consequences
- 5. absolute /
prescriptive / free
- 6. Universalisable
for a kingdom of
ends
- 7. intrinsic good

So DID Kant get it right?

The criticisms and counter-arguments are legion.

At AS, concentrate perhaps on 5 accusations & replies:

1. Kant ignores emotions

Reply: Not strictly true

Emotions are by definition irrelevant to your **WILL**.

Happiness **does** have a place - it comes as the **result** of doing your duty. We do not praise people for being happy – we envy them.

2. Kant ignores consequences

Not true

What else is the kingdom of moral ends if it is not the desired consequence of Good Will?

Kant envisages a society that is ultimately happy (the *summum bonum*) as the consequence of doing its collective duty.

3. Kant's theory can't deal with conflicting duties

Reply: No reply

Actually, Kant thought that it was our duty to use reason to find the solution to apparent conflicts. He didn't really have one for the axe murderer.

Some have tried to rescue Kant, e.g.
W.D. Ross: Some duties override others.

4. Kant has to appeal to God

There does seem to be a contradiction:

Kant says first that the moral law is **autonomous** (it has its own authority), then says that we all strive for the **summum bonum**, which is the **highest good**.

The **summum bonum** is the expected reward we get for completing our moral duty, and **God** (says Kant) probably exists to provide **immortality** for us to achieve it.

But:

Kant did not mean that we should be morally good for self-interest, just in order to make sure that we get immortality & the **summum bonum**.

His ideas about God are an **overall** justification for his ideas about morality. We still **MUST** act **only** through the **Good Will**.

5. Universalisability makes Kant's ethics the completely fair system

True – R.M. Hare even used it (and prescriptiveness) as the basis for his own system of ethics. It appeals to most people's sense of justice & fairness.

It is similar to 'Do unto others ...'

Summary of evaluation points:

Ignores emotions
Ignores consequences
Can't deal with conflicting rules
Appeals to self-interest by referring to God
But universalisability rules o.k..

So was he right?

We probably need a composite theory which can cope with the different theories, rather than claiming that one is right and all the rest are wrong.

There's an awful lot in Kant that appeals, not least universalisability, and the Good Will.

Meanwhile, here's a picture of an Immanuel Kant finger puppet staring wistfully into the distance, just to prove that Kant memorabilia is alive and well.

And finally

If you really want to prove to the examiners that you have been working hard, and that you don't stay up late at night watching dodgy films

Make sure you spell Kant's first name correctly:
