

Discussion Guide, Beginner

Episode 6

According to utilitarians, the right thing to do is always to maximize happiness. Libertarians think that the right thing to do is most often to let people do whatever they want. John Locke's theory says that there are unalienable rights, afforded to every human being by the "law of nature."

The philosopher Immanuel Kant thought that each of these views was mistaken. Against the utilitarians, Kant held that freedom—and not happiness—is the goal of morality; against the libertarians, Kant denied that freedom is doing whatever one wants; and against Locke, he held that morality, duty, and rights have their basis in human reason, not in a law of nature.

So who got it right?

1.

According to Kant, morality is doing the right thing *just because* you know it's the right thing. Is that true? Kant imagines a shopkeeper who does not overcharge his customers only because he fears that word of his dishonesty will spread and he'll lose money. Kant thinks there's nothing morally worthy about his action; his honesty is mere prudence, mere selfishness. Do you agree?

1.

Kant imagines a second person, who is naturally sweet and kind and loving. She always does the right thing—but only because being good brings her pleasure. Kant thinks that her actions are not really moral because, like the actions of the prudent shopkeeper, they aim at personal pleasure. Sure, it's a good thing that she wants to help people, but Kant thinks there is no deep reason to admire her. Do you agree?

2.

Kant also thinks the naturally kind person is not really moral because she acts out of habit. According to Kant, habits can be useful, but not moral. Is that right? Is your childhood education really just a kind of conditioning and not really moral? What is moral character, anyway? Is it what you tend to *do*, or is it your *attitude*?

3.

Suppose that Charlie is always up to mischief, but Frank is always there to stop it. As a result, Charlie *tends* to do the right thing. But he always *wants* to do the wrong thing. Is Charlie moral?

4.

Kant thinks that morality is a kind of law; everyone has to obey it. Therefore, he thinks it must be the case that everyone *could* obey it. This is his test for morality. According to Kant, your action is moral only if it's done from a motive that everyone else could act on at the same time as you're acting on it.

But is that right? On the one hand, the test shows that you shouldn't lie to people to get what you want. If everyone lied to get what they want, and then you were to try, nobody would believe you. On the other hand, what if you want to visit a nature preserve? If everyone were to visit at the same time, they would destroy it. But you know they won't visit, so isn't it alright for you to go? Is there something

problematic about an action that can never be open to everyone? Does Kant have a point?

1.

Is Kant right that you must always have humanity or human reason as your end? Is there something immoral about someone who seeks only pleasure—like a couch potato—at the expense of developing his mind?

2.

Kant thinks that every rational human being has dignity, and that everyone's worth is infinite. Is that true? Do murderers have dignity? (Kant thinks they do, because they have the capacity to choose to do the right thing.)

3.

If all people have dignity and infinite worth, then how do we make choices about life and death? Suppose we have to choose between repairing a road in Boston and vaccinating children in Toledo. If we repair the road, ten fewer children will die in car accidents in Boston. If we vaccinate, twenty children will be saved in Toledo. If everyone has *infinite* worth, how do we choose? What would a utilitarian say?

4.

According to Kant, the goal of morality is freedom. But for Kant, freedom is not just doing whatever you want. It's living by your own reason. Brainwashing, advertising, cravings, and desires—all of these make you unfree.

Is Kant right about freedom? Isn't freedom just the ability to do what you want, when you want? What difference does it make that some of your desires are implanted in you through advertising?

Or does Kant have a point? Is it possible to be unfree even if no one holds you back? Is it possible to be a slave to your impulses, cravings, or desires? Isn't it *liberating* to learn to how to control your impulses and desires?