

Discussion Guide, Advanced

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 famous philosopher Immanuel Kant thought that each of these views was mistaken. Against utilitarians, Kant holds that freedom—and not happiness—is the goal of morality; against Libertarians, Kant denies that freedom consists in doing whatever you want; and against Locke, he holds that morality, duty, and rights have their basis in human reason, not in a law of nature.

So who got it right? A good way to broach the discussion is to examine what Kant says about duty, law, humanity, and freedom.

Duty

According to Kant, it's common sense that you should always do your duty. Moreover, common sense tells you to do the right thing *just because* it's the right thing and not for some other reason. Morality is a matter of having the right attitude, or acting for the right reason. It's your motive that is important.

To explain this idea, 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. Sure, the prudent shopkeeper does the right thing, so to speak. But he does it for the wrong reason. There's nothing morally worthy about his action. His honesty is mere prudence, mere selfishness. Kant's conclusion is that morality consists in doing the right thing for the right reason, or, as he argues, morality is acting from the motive of duty.

Kant imagines a second person, who is naturally sweet and kind and loving. She always does the right thing—but she does it because being good brings her pleasure. Kant thinks this person is not really moral; her actions deserve “praise and encouragement,” but not “esteem.” In a way, they're just like the actions of the prudent shopkeeper, since they aim at personal pleasure. That's not morality but habit, argues Kant.. Morality is doing the right thing just because you know it's the right thing.

Is Kant right about what it is to do your duty?

1.

Do you always have to do the right thing *just* because it's the right thing?

2.

Suppose you tell truth because you're afraid you'll be caught lying. Haven't you done the right thing in the end?

3.

Suppose a man rescues someone from drowning only to get a reward. Has he done the right thing?

4.

Are children who are brought up to be honest and kind not truly moral?

5.

Is your childhood education really just a kind of conditioning, or is there value in it aside from making you reflect on your duty?

6.

What is moral character, anyway? Is it what you tend to *do*, or is it your *attitude*?

Law

Kant says that morality is doing the right thing for the right reason. But what is the right thing? What is our duty?

Kant's claim is that our duty is given by the idea of a *law*—something that tells us what we *must do*, no matter what. The idea of a law is that it binds everyone, unconditionally. Everyone has to obey it. But this means that, for something to be a law, it must be the case that everyone *could* obey it. Indeed, says Kant, this is the test for morality. 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.

Kant demonstrates this test using an example. Suppose you want to swindle your way into some money. You think to yourself, "I'm going to ask my friend to *lend* me \$50, and I'll promise to pay him back—but I won't." Kant thinks your motive doesn't pass the test. If *everyone* made false promises in order to get money, and then *you*

tried to make a false promise to get money, it wouldn't work; your friend wouldn't believe you, since everyone is always lying. Therefore, your motive is not the kind that everyone else could act on while you're acting on it, and that means it's immoral, thinks Kant.

Is this the right test for morality?

1.

Kant's test rules out actions that work by making an exception of yourself. Can you think of other examples of such actions that seem to be immoral?

2.

Can you think of exceptional actions that aren't immoral? Suppose 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?

Humanity

According to Kant, there are different ways to state what our duty is. One of them involves the idea of a law. Another involves the idea of humanity, or human reason. Morality says that you should never treat rational human beings *merely* as means to your end. Whenever you use someone's skills or services to your own end, you should always also treat that person as an end in him- or herself.

Since you're a rational human being, this includes you! Kant thinks that you should never use your *own* reason merely as a means to your end. Therefore, you must never commit suicide, he thinks. That would be to use your reason to

end your own existence, which is incompatible with making your own reason your end.

1.

Is Kant right that you must never commit suicide? What if you are terminally ill and in endless pain?

2.

More generally, is he right that you must always have humanity or human reason as your end?

3.

Is there something immoral about a person who seeks only pleasure—like a couch potato—at the expense of developing his mind?

4.

Is it necessarily immoral to sacrifice your life to save a beautiful object, like a painting by Picasso, or the Grand Canyon? Isn't there something potentially noble about such an action, even if sacrifices your own humanity?

Freedom

Kant thinks that the goal of morality is not happiness but freedom. But freedom is not just doing whatever you want. Kant has a more demanding idea of freedom as self-determination.

You are free in Kant's sense only if you live by your own reason. If someone brainwashes you into doing something, you are not free. Likewise, if you buy

expensive shoes only because you've had the desire implanted in you through advertising, then you are also not free. If you eat lots of ice cream because you can't control your cravings, then you're also not free. You are little more than a slave to your desires. You lack freedom in each of these cases because it's not your own reason that makes you do what you do, but something else—another person, your given desires, your natural cravings, and so on. In Kant's view, you are not fully free.

Is Kant right about freedom?

1.

Isn't freedom just the ability to do what you want, when you want?

2.

What difference does it make that some of your desires come from advertising? Or does Kant have a point? Is it possible to be unfree even if no one holds you back?

3.

Are smokers fully free? No one keeps them from quitting smoking, but they often still can't quit, even though they want to. Are these smokers enslaved to their desires, to cigarettes, to their own bodies?

4.

Do you have impulses, cravings, or desires that you find it hard to control? Would it be *liberating* to be able to control them to a greater extent?