

## Give an account of Kant's theory of ethics – Jonathan Crawford

Immanuel Kant was a philosopher who lived during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He based his ethics around reason, not revelation, or in other words, our acts and not the results of our actions. This therefore makes his ethics deontological. This comes from the Greek root word, *deon*, which means duty. This is different to teleological ethics. This comes from the Greek root word, *telos*, which means end, or results-based ethics.

Kant's deontological position provides the basis of the theories that he suggests. He says that in order to act morally, we must do our duty. Our duty is to be done irrespective of emotion, desires and situations and therefore we must not act in accordance with these. Kant argues that the only time we don't do our duty is when we can't possibly do it, but there are times when we should do something and don't because we are unable to. If we should do it then it is possible to and we must do our duty even then. Anything that is not our duty is not moral. This raises an important question, how do we know what our duty is?

Kant believes that our first duty is to abide by the moral law. This is an objective moral law that is inside of all of us. Coinciding with his fundamentals, these laws are regardless of consequences. There are then three principles in which we must abide by. The first is the Universal law. This means that we must act in such a way that if everyone else acted in the same way, it'd be okay. An example of this is lying; it is immoral, for if everyone else lied, it would lead to a world where you couldn't trust anyone. The second principle is, do not treat humans as a means to an end. So in other words, never use humans for another purpose, or don't exploit them. Examples of this action are slavery, human sacrifice and torture. This differs to the theory of *teleology*. The final principle is that we must act as though we live in a kingdom of ends. So we must act as rule-maker, and don't use other law-breaking to justify our actions. So gassing soldiers because they did that in the holocaust would be deemed wrong.

There are also Moral statements. There are two types of statements, **a priori** and **a posteriori**. 'A priori statements' can be made without any experience; it is like saying '1 + 1 = 2'. No previous knowledge would have been required to know that. Whereas, a posteriori synthetic are statements that are made after experience, so if you say apples grow on tree. So you would have had to have seen this before you could know this. So in other words priori statements are true by definition, but posterior statements, are true with evidence. There are also two types of knowledge, **analytic** and **synthetic**. Analytic statements are based on logic and synthetic ones on proof. Kant believes that **moral** statements are 'a priori synthetic'. This is because moral statements are a result of reason and not experience, but they are synthetic because they may be right or wrong. Moral statements, being synthetic, need some sort of evidence so they are may be right or wrong. They are bivalent.

Kant also describes how we determine what actions are forbidden. This is known as the categorical imperative, or what we have to do. Morality is **prescriptive**,

meaning it promotes moral behaviour, so once you know about this morality, you know why your doing this action. This is irrespective of the result, which means they are categorical. This is in contrast to hypothetical imperatives which are what we want to do, or our desires, which are not important.

Behaving morally, and following our duty isn't all for nothing according to Kant. He believes that if you do your duty, you will reach the highest form of good known as good will. Once we have a good will it becomes a circle, as having a good will, means you do your duties, selflessly – not allowing emotions to get in the way. Kant then goes on to say that if all humans were to reach this stage, they would reach the ultimate end known as the **summum bonum**. Although Kant rejects the theological arguments for God, he does believe that since humans don't appear to be achieving the summum bonum, it must be able to be achieved in a next life. He rejects ideas that the summum bonum can't be achieved as he upholds the idea that it's our duty.

### **How helpful would this theory be when faced with the question of abortion?**

In order to give say how helpful it would be I must first discuss how Kant would see this act, moral or immoral. The act itself is murder, which Kant sees as morally wrong for a number of reasons. The first is that it is using the life of a human for selfish reasons. This would be using the baby as a means to an end. This is one of Kant's principles, and this act would be seen as immoral.

The second reason why murder would be immoral is because it doesn't comply with the universal law. That is, if everyone in the world acted in this particular manner then there would be no-one alive – except for one of course! If this would be the result, then of course murder can't be a moral action. This is a dramatic irony though, as Kant's ethics are deontological and this seems to be a teleological response.

The third and final reason why this act is not dutiful is because of Kant's law – maker principle. That is, that the mother should act as if she was the law -maker. The fact that every mother who is in that situation may abort the baby is no excuse.

However, some may argue that, there situations where abortion is the best option. Maybe the family doesn't have enough money to support the baby, and thus leading the baby unfairly into a life of poverty. Or maybe the mother was raped, and the baby would be born into an unloving family.

Kant has two answers to this. This first is that our duty is our duty. No emotions or situations should come in the way of our actions. If we let them do so, we are acting against the universal moral law and acting immorally. Kant's ethics are more concerned with the actions and not the results. So murder is always wrong.

The second way he might answer this is by saying that no matter what the outcome of the event you must always do the right thing. If you use the example of a man

who comes to murder your friend who is hiding inside your home. According to Kant it is the right thing to do as it is not your fault the man is misusing the information that you justifiably gave to him. This can be applied to the way the baby lives as a result of being allowed to live.

So, in conclusion, it seems Kant's ethics are quite helpful; this is due to the style they are presented in. Because clear guidelines are given it is easy to apply them to situations, even though sometimes the answer may seem a bit harsh.