

Explain kant's theory of duty as the basis for morality essay sample

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Kant (1724-1804) lived a totally uneventful life in Königsberg, East Prussia and was a key figure in the European Enlightenment. He was influenced by the scientist known for discovering gravity, Isaac Newton. Kant viewed the universe in a very mechanistic way, i. e., things operated according to fixed rules and emphasised the pre-eminence of reason as an authority for knowledge. It was this emphasis on reason that led him towards his deontological theory, therefore he was concerned with the actions, not the consequences.

Kant's theory is deontological because it's based on duty. To act morally is to do one's duty, and one's duty is to obey the moral law. Kant believed that we should not be influenced by feeling and inclination, we should not act out of love or compassion but only out of duty. He also believed that it isn't our duty to do things we were unable to do. For Kant, the pure fact that we ought to do something implies that it is actually possible. Moral statements are said to be prescriptive, they prescribe an action. An 'ought' implies a 'can'.

Kant goes on to say that every human seeks an ultimate end called the supreme good, the summum bonum- a state in which human virtue and happiness are united. However, since it is impossible for humans to achieve such a state in one lifetime, he deduced that we had to have immortal souls to succeed. Although Kant rejected theological arguments for the existence of God, his ethical theory assumes immortality and God's existence. Kant believed that God must exist to provide an opportunity for reaching this supreme good. So, for Kant, morality leads to God.

Kant believed that there is an objective moral law and that we know this law through our reason. We know the moral law without reference to any consequences.

“ Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not merely conjecture them and see them as thought obscured in darkness or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon: I see them before me, and I associate them directly with the consciousness of my own existence.” Kant (1788)

He did not look at the world and ask if freedom and moral choice were possible. Instead, he started with the existence of moral choice, and then sought to find its implications. So, for example, we know we are free because we experience moral choice, we do not experience moral choice only after coming to the conclusion that we are free.

To understand Kant's moral law, some definitions are needed. A statement is analytic if the predicate is included within the subject. For example, ' all females are spinsters' is analytic as the meaning of the subject (spinster) includes the predicate (female). Analytic statements are necessarily true, they must be true because their truth depends on the way words are used and it simply would not make sense to say they were not true. The statement is also a priori which means that its truth is known independent of experience, we do not have to undertake a survey to determine that ' all spinsters are females are true'. A statement is synthetic if the predicate is

not included in the subject and therefore it firstly tells us something about the subject which we wouldn't not otherwise know and secondly it may or may not be true. For instance, ' all bachelors are happy'. This statement is also a posteriori because it is based on experience, in other words we would have to undertake a survey of bachelors to decide whether it is true.

Kant argued that all moral concepts have their origin a priori. Almost every statement is either a priori analytic or a posteriori synthetic, but Kant considered that statements about the moral law were very unusual in that they were a priori synthetic. In other words, they were a priori (independent of experience) but they were also, synthetic not analytically or necessarily true).

This placed Kant in direct opposition to utilitarians, who consider the consequences of an action (experience) as fundamental in deciding what is moral. If a murderer asked us whether our friend, who he was pursuing, was hiding in our house, Kant would insist we were honest. Kant aimed to start a new starting point for morality, a starting point that was not dependent on anything as ambiguous as evidence. He found this starting point in the idea of ' good will'.

" 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...The sight of a being who is not graced by any touch of a pure and good will but who yet enjoys an uninterrupted prosperity can never delight a rational and impartial spectator. Thus a good will seems to constitute the

indispensable condition of being even worthy of happiness." -Kant ,
Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals, 1785

Kant wants to place good will at the very centre of his ethics, and in doing so, he was to go beyond anything that had been written before. In his book, Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals, quoted from above, he argues that the highest form of good is good will and to have a good will is to do one's duty. To do one's duty is to perform actions that are morally required, and to avoid actions that are morally forbidden. Doing one's duty is the right thing, not the wrong thing. We are to do our duty because, simply, it is our duty to do it. To perform a moral action out of desire for the good consequence it brings is to act in self-interest, and is not a morally good action. To tell the truth, because it's in our interest to do so, isn't a moral action. Duty is good in itself. Kant acknowledged that happiness is also good, and that it comes as a reward for acting through good will, but that duty is the highest good.

Kant believed we should act out of our duty, and not emotion. I may act out of kindness, generosity or compassion, but in these circumstances, the act confers virtue on me. Even if duty demanded the same action, but it was done for a motive, such compassion, then my act may be good but I'm not virtuous for doing it. If I give money to a beggar because duty demands it, then I'm virtuous for doing so. This makes Kant seem rather strict and uninterested in human emotions. In fact, he argued that duty and reason can help to guide our emotions, so that we aren't ruled by them. A butcher acts

with a good will if he charges his customers a fair price because it is right to do so, not because he knows they will go elsewhere if he doesn't.

A moral person must be a rational being. Being good means having a good will. A good will is when I do my duty for the sake of duty alone. I do my duty because it's right, and for no other reason. Kant is described as having produced a system of ethics based on reason and not intuition, as he wished to establish a similarly regular and predictable basis for ethical decision making, and used reason because it is innate in every one and when properly applies, it reaches the same conclusions.