

Iain,

it would seem that once again, my words have been used as a weapon against me. Why, I don't know. After all, at the end of the day I and others I know have always been willing to listen to alternative points of view. As a scientist, I believe in a balanced and well thought out argument. So here is an alternative to Mr Grieves Kantian model. As a research scientist myself.. ..I KNOW about ethics!! I know about Kantian philosophy. It is good that I seem to be continually quoted, even if misunderstood, at least it shows that people take notice of what I have to say. Please feel free to add to this open' debate by including the following discussion.

Immanuel Kant argued that moral acts are based upon general principles that apply unconditionally.

However, Kant's ideas are argued to be of limited value as a guide to moral conduct.

An internet source known as the Mark Moss web site examines criticisms of Kantian philosophy:

[http://www.markwmoss.com/value\\_of\\_kantian\\_ethics.htm](http://www.markwmoss.com/value_of_kantian_ethics.htm)

See below:

regards

Dave Charlton

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What is wrong with Kantian Philosophy?

1. Simplistic model of causality, which examines action solely in terms of intention;
2. Omission of any consideration of emotion as a motivation for action
3. Use of maxims, which it is argued are an impoverished way to express moral truths;
4. Belief that moral goodness is incompatible with the presence of contradiction;
5. Preference for the objective, ahistorical and unitary over the inter-subjective, contingent and pluralist, a prejudice that seems to exclude any notion of innovation and moral progress.

Kantian Ethics

Kant's anti-naturalistic, anti-utilitarian ethical theory argued that human beings could autonomously use their reason in order to determine whether an

action was morally good. By expressing the principles that underlie individual actions in terms of maxims and seeing if they could be successfully universalised to group or societal levels, Kant argued that we could work out for ourselves which actions counted as moral ones and therefore what duties we should have. If one could find contradictions in such attempts to universalise, then the action would be considered immoral and should not be performed.

In the following sections, Kantian ethics is critiqued in terms of five interrelated perspectives, each of which suggest numerous practical limitations to his theory.

#### A Simplistic Model of Causality

Kant's theory advocates that actions are analysed solely in terms of the intentions that lead to such actions. However his rationalist, 18th century perspective appears to exclude important findings from sociology and psychoanalysis in the 19th and 20th centuries, namely the importance of tradition and unconscious processes in motivating human action and social interaction more generally. Human beings appear to be much more complicated creatures than simple rule-followers, a fact that Kant's theory does not seem to acknowledge. Skills, both individual and social, are often more likely causes for action than the application of rules.

To focus on the conscious intentions formulated by human beings ignores the fact that such intentions only make sense against a background of personal values and cultural norms that while they may be difficult or even impossible to articulate, represent significant resources that enable action to take place. Without being socialised into such backgrounds, human beings would be incapable of performing most kinds of intentional action, whether moral or immoral.

#### The Privilege of Reason over Emotion

In judging the moral worth of an action, Kant privileges consideration of reason over emotion. According to Kant, actions motivated by compassion would not count as moral, even if they had beneficial consequences. Kant argues that since different people have different emotional responses to events, these cannot be significant in determining whether an action is moral for society as a whole.

However Kant's dispassionate search for universal morals ignores the fact that people can often happily agree on particular elements of some matters while disagreeing over other aspects and respecting such differences. In their day-to-day lives many people may care little for universal moral truths and be more concerned with forms of practice that maintain acceptable levels of security and reduce anxiety. Thus they may consider it moral not to question another person's sincerely held beliefs too deeply (in search of universal moral knowledge) if the questioning would lead to a state of extreme anxiety or potential conflict. Kant does not seem to like diversity or the Nietzschean view that morality should be considered more as interpretation rather than law, preferring instead to reduce morality to a series of universal truths that should unconditionally bind everyone together.

Also, one could easily argue that since action is often (if not always) guided by a combination of reason and emotion, any reasonable judgement of an action's moral worth should take emotions into account, even if only to

illustrate how emotional responses may not lead to moral actions and outcomes. What would be really interesting to analyse though would be the ways in which reason and emotion combine to produce actions that either are, or come to be considered, moral, by a community over time. One might expect reason to control emotion under some circumstances in production of moral actions (e.g. when repaying one's debts) whilst at other times emotion might dominate reason (e.g. in saving someone's life).

#### A Reliance Upon Maxims

Kant argued that moral knowledge could be expressed in terms of maxims, simple statements (e.g. one should respect one's parents) that express unconditional truths. However if we take a view that human beings make sense of their world through the production and reproduction of shared narratives, which highlight the diversity of human intentions and responses to events, and that all generalisations about human beings are dependent on context and the particulars of time and space, then such a view can easily be challenged

From this it is easy to argue that maxims fail to capture much of the complexity of human experience e.g. the inevitable tensions and contradictions that exist between traditions and intentions in modern society. Narrative, it is argued, represents a format that is much more suitable to the task of moral inquiry and helping people with their moral reasoning. Throughout history, the production of literary works and plays have been significant in raising moral awareness about important issues e.g. Orwell's 1984 and Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* in promoting discussion about evils of totalitarianism. Also as psychoanalysts and therapists have argued, narratives may help illustrate the operation of unconscious processes and the production of new narratives, that highlight some under-explored yet important aspect of human being, may be useful in helping re-evaluate the moral worth of actions and enabling personal and cultural change.

#### A Rejection of Contradiction

Kant argued that moral maxims were those that contained no internal contradictions. It seems that Kant viewed morality as some kind of logically consistent system that we could develop, perhaps like science. However the usefulness of such a perspective is dubious given that perhaps the most significant feature of today's post-modern world is the presence of contradiction. It would be better to view morality more as a process through which people try to cope with contradictory elements by producing courses of action that they believe to be good. Rather than try to eliminate contradictions, we should perhaps accept that life is full of contradictory forces and desires and that it is up to us to create morals to cope with them.

Advanced societies inevitably contain numerous groups that each have their own interests and desires which may often be in conflict. To try and find a way to eliminate the contradictions between their respective viewpoints may well be impossible. Moral progress might therefore be better advanced by a quest for greater appreciation of others' viewpoints than a search for universal maxims, and facilitation between opposing groups.

#### A Preference for the Objective, A historical and the Unitary

With his claim that moral acts are done solely out of a sense of duty which

apply to everyone at all times, Kant takes a hugely static, a historical line that appears to lock human beings into fairly narrow modes of inquiry that may inhibit possibilities for change and moral progress. Conformity seems to be preferred over dissent and the freedom to act differently. However one could argue that moral progress often depends upon dissent and celebration of diversity e.g. Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, and a desire to deviate from the moral codes established by those in power and to create an appreciation of a new form of society.

Kant's anti-consequentialism also ignores the fact that human actions, even if motivated out of a sense of duty, may often have unintended, immoral consequences. For example in the 1930s, many Germans may have considered it their duty to support Hitler in order to save their country from economic disaster. However it is unlikely that they would have considered their actions to be moral if they had known at the time of the great terror that the Nazi regime would unleash and that it would ultimately lead to the Holocaust.

#### Conclusion

So in conclusion, Kant's scheme is of limited use as a guide to moral conduct. It seems designed to lead to the generation of simple, general, uncontroversial prescriptions that would be of limited use in complex, particular situations. Also, by asking to us to search for universal moral truths, his theory tends to close down debate and inquiry, rather than help human beings with developing increased appreciation of other peoples' points of view and expand the amount of legitimate moral interpretive difference present within society.