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Reading Question Week 6

Kant, "Duty and Reason as the Ultimate Principle" - pp. 506-512

1. Explain why Kant thinks the only thing truly good "in itself" is a good will.

For Kant, the only thing truly good in itself is goodwill because it is motivated by duty and the moral law, and because actions motivated by duty have moral worth regardless of their outcomes.

2. What does Kant mean by doing our actions "from the motive of duty"? How is this different from acting out of self-interest, or out of natural inclination, or even just in "conformity" with duty?

For Kant, doing our actions from the motive of duty means acting solely because it is our moral duty to do so, regardless of our personal desires or inclinations. This is different from acting out of self-interest, natural inclination, or even just in conformity with duty, which are not considered truly moral actions.

3. What does it mean for an action to have moral worth based on its principle, not based on the end it achieves?

For Kant, an action has moral worth based on its principle, not based on the end it achieves. An action is morally good only if it is done out of respect for moral principles, such as the categorical imperative, rather than out of a desire to achieve a particular outcome.

4. Explain in your own words Kant's two formulations of the Categorical Imperative, on 510 and 511-512:

a) I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law

The first formulation, found on page 510, is: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law." In other words, when we consider whether an action is morally right or wrong, we should ask ourselves whether we would want everyone else to act in the same way in similar situations. If we cannot consistently will that our maxim (the principle behind our action) become a universal law, then the action is morally impermissible.

For example, if someone lies to get out of a difficult situation, they are acting on the maxim that it is acceptable to lie in order to avoid negative consequences. However, if this maxim became a universal law, no one would be able to trust anyone else, and society would break down. Therefore, according to the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative, lying is morally impermissible.

b) Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end

The second formulation, found on pages 511-512, is: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end." This formulation emphasizes the importance of treating people as ends in themselves, rather than as mere means to achieve our own goals. This means that we should always respect people's autonomy and dignity, and not manipulate or exploit them for our own benefit.

For example, if someone hires a worker but pays them less than a fair wage, they are treating the worker as a mere means to achieve their own profit, rather than treating them as an end in themselves. According to the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, this is morally impermissible because it fails to respect the worker's dignity and autonomy.

Mill, "Happiness as the Foundation of Morality" pp. 512-517

1. Write out and explain Mill's "Greatest Happiness Principle".

Mill's Greatest Happiness Principle is a principle of utility that states that actions are morally right to the extent that they promote happiness or pleasure, and morally wrong to the extent that they produce unhappiness or pain. It emphasizes the importance of impartiality in decision-making and promotes promotion of the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people, while also recognizing the value of higher pleasures over lower pleasures.

2. What does Mill mean when he writes, "Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied"?

When Mill writes, "Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied," he is emphasizing the importance of pursuing higher pleasures, even if they may not always be immediately pleasurable or satisfying, over lower pleasures that may provide more immediate satisfaction but ultimately offer little real value.

3. How does Mill discuss quality and kinds of happiness in contrast to calculating the quantity of happiness?

Mill's approach to happiness is not solely focused on calculating the quantity of happiness produced by a given action. Instead, he believed that we should take into account both the quantity and the quality of happiness produced. In order to promote the greatest amount of happiness, we should strive to promote higher pleasures and discourage lower pleasures. By doing so, we can help individuals achieve a more fulfilling and satisfying life that is focused on long-term happiness and personal growth rather than just immediate gratification.

4. What role does all of previous human history and the experience of wise and competent people play in figuring out what will bring the most happiness in our actions?

Mill believed that a combination of empirical observation, reason, and social norms can be used to determine what actions will lead to the most happiness. He believed that by carefully considering the experiences of wise and competent individuals throughout history, we can gain valuable insights into the types of actions and behaviors that promote human flourishing.