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Intro to Philosophy

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Reading Questions

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

Kant believes that the only thing that is truly good "in itself" is a good will, because it is the only thing that is intrinsically good and not subject to any external condition or qualification.

According to his ethical theory, the morality of an action is not determined by its consequences, but rather by the motive behind it. A good will is one that acts out of respect for the moral law, and is characterized by its commitment to duty. Kant argues that a good will is valuable in itself, regardless of the outcome of the actions it produces, because it is an expression of human dignity and moral worth. Thus, for Kant, a good will is the foundation of morality, and the only thing that can be considered truly good in itself.

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?

According to Immanuel Kant, doing our actions "from the motive of duty" means acting based on a sense of moral obligation or principle, rather than out of self-interest or natural inclination. It involves making decisions and taking actions based on a universal principle that is applicable to all rational beings, rather than simply seeking personal gain or pleasure. This is different from acting in "conformity" with duty, which may involve following rules or social norms without necessarily understanding or internalizing the moral reasoning behind them. Ultimately, for Kant, actions performed from the motive of duty are the most moral because they are guided by a sense of respect for the moral law itself, rather than any external reward or punishment.

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

An action that has moral worth based on its principle rather than the end it achieves is one that is judged to be morally right or wrong based on the intention behind the action and the principles that guide it, rather than the outcome it produces. In other words, the moral value of an action is determined not by its consequences, but by the underlying motives and values that drive it.

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

The first formulation, on page 510, states that one should never act in a way that they cannot will to become a universal law. This means that any action we take should be guided by a principle that we would be willing for everyone to follow, without exception. For example, if we lie to get out of a difficult situation, we should ask ourselves whether we would want lying to become a universal law, where everyone lies whenever it is convenient for them.

The second formulation, on pages 511-512, emphasizes the importance of treating humanity as an end in itself, rather than simply as a means to an end. This means that we should never use others as a mere tool to achieve our own goals, but always respect them as individuals with inherent dignity and worth. For example, if we hire someone to do a job for us, we should pay them fairly and treat them with respect, rather than exploiting them for our own benefit.

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

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

John Stuart Mill's "Greatest Happiness Principle" is a utilitarian ethical theory that posits that actions are right to the extent that they promote happiness and wrong to the extent that they produce the opposite of happiness, or pain. According to Mill, happiness is the ultimate end of human action, and everything else that we do is just a means to achieving that end. Furthermore, Mill believed that the happiness of one individual is no more important than the happiness of any other individual, and that the goal of ethics should be to maximize the happiness of all sentient beings.

The principle of utility, or the greatest happiness principle, states that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. Mill believed that the quality of happiness is more important than its quantity, and that certain kinds of pleasure, such as those that result from intellectual pursuits or virtuous actions, are superior to others.

Thus, he believed that the greatest happiness principle requires us to promote the highest quality of happiness for the greatest number of people.

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

Mill is arguing that it is better to pursue knowledge and understanding, even if it means experiencing occasional dissatisfaction or frustration, than to be content with ignorance and foolishness.

Socrates represents the ideal of a wise person who is aware of his own limitations and is always seeking knowledge and understanding. Despite the challenges and frustrations that come with this pursuit, Socrates remains dissatisfied because he knows that there is always more to learn and understand. Socrates represents the ideal of a wise person who is aware of his own limitations and is always seeking knowledge and understanding. Despite the challenges and frustrations that come with this pursuit, Socrates remains dissatisfied because he knows that there is always more to learn and understand.

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

Mill argued that there are higher and lower pleasures, and that the distinction between them is based on their quality rather than their quantity. Higher pleasures are those that are more intellectual, emotional, and moral in nature, while lower pleasures are more physical and sensual. For example, the pleasure of reading a great novel or listening to beautiful music would be considered a higher pleasure, while the pleasure of eating a delicious meal or engaging in sexual activity would be considered a lower pleasure. Mill believed that it is the higher pleasures that are most important for human happiness, and that they are more valuable than the lower pleasures. He argued that people who have experienced both higher and lower pleasures would prefer the higher pleasures if they were given a choice, because they are more satisfying and have a lasting effect on the individual's well-being.

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?

The previous human history and the experiences of wise and competent people can provide valuable insights into what actions might lead to the most happiness. By studying the successes and failures of past civilizations and individuals, we can learn from their mistakes and adopt strategies that have proven to be effective. For example, many philosophers and religious leaders have emphasized the importance of virtues such as compassion, generosity, and gratitude, which have been shown to increase well-being and promote social cohesion. Similarly, historical events such as wars, pandemics, and economic crises have demonstrated the importance of resilience, adaptability, and cooperation in overcoming adversity and building a better future.