

Shad Downes

4/4/23

Paper 2 - Ethics

Professor Sanchez

Kantianism: A Coherent Approach to Moral Life?

Kantianism is a philosophical system based on the ideas of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant is widely regarded as one of the most influential thinkers in the history of philosophy, and his ideas have had a profound impact on fields ranging from metaphysics and epistemology to ethics and political theory.

Kantianism emerged in the late 18th century, during the Enlightenment period in Europe, as a response to the dominant philosophical views of the time, which were largely based on the work of earlier thinkers such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. Kant sought to develop a more systematic and rigorous approach to philosophy, one that would be grounded in reason and empirical observation.

Kant's major philosophical works include the "Critique of Pure Reason" (1781), which focuses on epistemology and the nature of knowledge, the "Critique of Practical Reason" (1788), which deals with ethics and moral philosophy, and the "Critique of Judgment" (1790), which explores aesthetics and the philosophy of art. These works laid the foundation for Kantianism, which has

been further developed and refined by subsequent philosophers in the centuries since Kant's death.

Kantianism is a major normative ethical theory that emphasizes the importance of the moral law, or the categorical imperative, as the foundation of moral reasoning. Kantianism presents that ethical actions are those that are done out of respect for the moral law, rather than for any personal or instrumental reasons. In this paper, I will explore the main viewpoints and arguments of Kantianism, and provide a practical example to illustrate how someone who advocates the theory would address a real-life ethical situation. Finally, I will present my reflections on whether Kantianism succeeds or fails as a coherent approach to moral life in general.

Kantianism emphasizes the importance of the moral law, which is grounded in reason and is universal and necessary. According to Kant, the moral law is expressed through the categorical imperative, which is a command that is binding on all rational beings. The categorical imperative has two main formulations: the formula of universal law and the formula of humanity. The formula of universal law states that we should act only on that maxim which we can will to be a universal law, while the formula of humanity states that we should always treat humanity, whether in ourselves or others, as an end in itself and never merely as a means to an end.

One of the key concepts in Kantianism is the notion of moral autonomy. According to Kant, moral autonomy means that we are free to act in accordance with the moral law and that we are responsible for our actions. In contrast to heteronomy, which is the state of being subject to external influences, moral autonomy requires that we use our reason to determine what is right and wrong, rather than simply following the commands of others.

Another important concept in Kantianism is the idea of moral worth. According to Kant, an action has moral worth if it is done out of respect for the moral law, rather than for any personal or instrumental reasons. Actions that are done for personal or instrumental reasons, such as self-interest or the desire for reward, do not have moral worth, since they are not motivated by a respect for the moral law.

To illustrate how someone who advocates Kantianism would address a real-life ethical situation, consider the following example. Suppose that a friend asks you to lie to their boss to cover up a mistake that they made at work. A Kantian would argue that lying in this situation is not morally permissible, since it violates the formula of universal law. If lying were a universal law, then the concept of trustworthiness would cease to exist, and lying would become meaningless.

Furthermore, lying treats the boss as a mere means to an end, rather than as an end in themselves, which violates the formula of humanity. Therefore, a Kantian would argue that you should refuse to lie, and instead encourage your friend to take responsibility for their mistake.

While Kantianism provides a rigorous and systematic approach to moral reasoning, it also has some limitations. One of the main criticisms of Kantianism is that it is overly rigid and inflexible. The theory does not allow for any exceptions to the moral law, which can lead to counterintuitive or absurd results in some situations. For example, Kantianism would require you to tell the truth to a murderer who is asking for the location of their intended victim, even if doing so would lead to harm or death.

Another criticism of Kantianism is that it is overly individualistic and does not take into account the context or relationships in which moral decisions are made. The theory places a strong

emphasis on the moral autonomy of the individual and does not consider the role that social structures and institutions play in shaping our moral compass.