Is morality based on reason?

KANT’S ARGUMENT
Immanuel Kant argued that morality was based on reason alone, and once we understood this, we would see that acting morally is the same as acting rationally.

Kant argued that morality, by definition, must help us decide what to do. When we are choosing how to act, we know that our self-interest or happiness influences our choices. However, happiness can’t be the basis of morality. First, what makes people happy differs. If morality depended on happiness, then it was right to do would change from one situation to the next. But, he argues, morality is the same for everyone. Second, sometimes happiness is morally bad. For instance, if someone enjoys hurting other people, the happiness they get from this is morally bad. It is bad to hurt someone; it is even worse to hurt someone and enjoy it. But if morality was about producing happiness, we would have to say ‘if you’re going to hurt someone, it is better to enjoy it – at least that way, someone is happy’. Which just seems wrong.

So if morality is not based on happiness, but it can help us decide what to do, then there must be something else that is capable of influencing our choices apart from happiness. And Kant argues there is – reason. We are able to think about and reflect on different actions, and decide between them. We are not ‘forced’ by our desires to act this way or that, we have a power of will that is distinct from desire and the pull of happiness.

Connecting reason and morality
So what is the connection between reason and morality? First, this capacity to choose freely is necessary for morality – animals and young children simply act on their desires, and so we don’t think they are capable of acting morally. Yes, their actions can have good or bad consequences, but because they don’t make choices in the right sense, we don’t really praise or blame them in the same way we do adults.

Second, says Kant, reason works in a way that is independent of our desires. This is easy to see when doing maths or science. For example, you have £20, and there’s a book and a CD you really want to get. But the CD is £13.99 and the book is £7.99. Despite the fact that you want £20 to be enough for both, it isn’t and you know this. The same is true, Kant argues, for reasoning about what we ought to do. Morality is independent of what we want.

Third, it is rational for everyone to believe that £20 is not enough for both the CD and the book. What it is rational to believe is ‘universal’ – the same for everyone. This ‘universality’ is just a feature of reason; reason doesn’t vary from one person to the next. So when it comes to what is rational to do, this is also the same for everyone. It is only rational to do what everyone can do. Morality is also the same for everyone.

This last point leads Kant to a moral test for our choices. When I choose to do something, my choice may depend on other people behaving differently. For instance, if I want to steal something, I can only do this – by definition – if someone else owns it. However, if everyone stole whatever they wanted whenever they wanted it, then the system
of ownership would break down. (Imagine everyone walking into shops and simply leaving with what they wanted…) But if no one owned anything, then it would be impossible to steal from them! So I can only steal if other people don’t steal.

This must go against reason, Kant argues, because acting rationally means acting in a way everyone can act. This test of reason is also the test of morality: you should act only those choices that everyone else could also act on. In *Groundwork to a Metaphysic of Morals*, Kant expresses the test, called the Categorical Imperative, like this:

Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

(A ‘maxim’ describes the choice you make, e.g. ‘to steal when I want something’, ‘to have fun’.)

**WHAT REASON RECOMMENDS**

Kant’s theory has two parts: that reason can tell us what to do, and that reason can motivate us to do it. We look at the first in this section, and the second in the next.

Suppose someone has no desires at all, there is nothing they want. However, they are rational. Will there be certain actions that they should do, and others they should avoid, just because they are rational? We can argue that there are not. If you have no ends, nothing you are seeking to achieve, then reason has nothing ‘to work with’. Whether an action is rational or not depends on what one is trying to achieve (is the action a good means to the end?); and on whether this end ‘helpful’ or ‘harmful’ to other ends one has.

For example, why should I eat? Because I am hungry – I want food; or, if I have lost my appetite, because I want to stay alive. Suppose I don’t want to stay alive – should I eat? Well, we can still ask why I don’t want to stay alive, e.g. because my life is painful – and then we can ask whether dying is the best means to my end of ceasing to feel pain, especially in relation to other ends I might have, e.g. being happy.

The same kind of considerations apply to moral actions. Why should I not steal? Because I want to avoid prison, because I do not enjoy other people getting angry with me, because I feel guilty if I do, or perhaps simply because I care about other people. In any case, we need some answer like this, one that cites a particular end I have, to decide what it is rational to do. Without citing any particular end, we cannot say whether an action is rational or not.

Kant’s reply is that it is only rational to do what everyone can do. And there are constraints on this, so reason can say what we should do without referring to what we want. Why think that we must all behave in the same way in order to be rational? Because ‘ universality’ is the nature of reason. What is rational is rational for all, not relative to one person or another.

We can agree that this is true about what it is rational to believe, as we saw above, but disagree that it is true about what it is rational to do. Acting irrationally, we may respond to Kant, is doing something that defeats what you want to achieve. So it is relative to what you want.
This argument allows that Kant could be right that morality involves behaving in a way that everyone could follow. But it claims that acting morally is not equivalent to acting rationally.

**REASON, MOTIVATION AND SELF-INTEREST**

Kant asserts that it is not only happiness and desire that can influence our choices, so can reason. But is this true? If it isn’t, if reason cannot motivate action, then to act morally I would have to want to. Telling me that I ought to be moral or that it is rational to be moral will not motivate me. Kant’s answer will only motivate us if he is right about reason being able to bring about action separately from what we want.

When we are trying to give people motivating reasons for doing something, we can argue, we appeal to what they want and what they care about. Appealing to something they don’t care about will make no difference to their decision. Whenever we make a choice, we always do so on the basis of something we want or care about. For example, unless I want not to steal, the argument that it is irrational to steal will make no difference to me.

In response, we can point out that when we say to someone ‘but stealing is wrong’, this is a consideration that will influence their decision. Arguments about what we morally ought to do motivate us, even when we want to do something that is morally wrong. So isn’t Kant right?

Not necessarily. Perhaps thinking about what we morally ought to do influences us because we care about what is morally right. Someone who doesn’t care about morality will not be influenced by our saying ‘but stealing is wrong’. Reason on its own doesn’t motivate us.

**Reason before desire?**

Perhaps this is too quick. We can always ask why someone desires something. For instance, suppose you want to do well in your studies – why? Presumably because you think that success will be good, better than failure. There are different answers to how or why success is good – you might think it will help you go to university, and this will help you get a better job. Or you might think knowledge is valuable for its own sake. You might simply enjoy it. Whatever your further thoughts on success, your desire to succeed is backed by a belief about what is good. This belief about what is good provides your reason for your desire.

This insight provides a theory about what it is to be rational (a theory that is quite different from Kant’s). When deciding what to do, our attitudes to each option is informed by reasoning. T M Scanlon argues that we have

> the capacity to recognize, assess, and be moved by reasons... every action that we take with even a minimum of deliberation about what to do reflects a judgment that a certain reason is worth acting on. (What We Owe to Each Other, p. 23)

To have a desire, to want to do something, is not simply an ‘urge’. If we think carefully about our desires, we can distinguish an urge to act, a feeling of unpleasantness, but also a sense that what our desire is for is good in some way. Imagine someone who has an urge
to read philosophy but can’t see anything good in it. This would be very unusual, and it would be strange to say that they want to read philosophy.

This shows that our desires respond to reasons. So if you can show someone the reason for being moral, e.g. that other people deserve to be treated well, then they can acquire the desire to act in this way. If this is right, we can motivate people to act morally without appealing to what they already want, but by appealing to reasons.

Suppose a self-interested person does not see any reason to be moral – can we argue that he is insensitive to reason? There are many motivations that we share with the selfish man, and we will appeal to these to try to demonstrate that there are reasons to be unselfish. But this is all we can do – appeal to desires and emotions that we share.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM**

Any view that justifies morality in terms of reasons that are not to do with our self-interest faces a general challenge: that human beings only ever act in ways that promote their own self-interest, a view called ‘psychological egoism’. If psychological egoism is right, there is no point in appealing to anything apart from self-interest in order to get people to act morally – it can have no effect on them.

Psychological egoism argues that whatever action you look at, you will find something that the agent has gained – or thought he would gain – from doing that action. It doesn’t matter how altruistic the action seems to be – giving money to charity, spending time comforting people who are in distress, etc. – there will always be something ‘in it’ for the person, and this is really why they do it. Any action will reveal an underlying self-interested motive.

Why should we believe this? Psychological egoists point to two things. First, when someone does an altruistic action, such as giving money to charity, they are doing what they want to do. And so they are getting what they want, they are satisfying their desires. Second, they get pleasure from what they do, a sense of satisfaction, that buzz that comes from ‘doing a good deed’. Alternatively, they may do what they do in order to avoid feeling guilty. In either case, they do what they do because it brings them pleasure or helps them avoid pain – and this is what motivates them.

**Objections**

However, we can object that people don’t always do what they want – they sometimes do what they feel they ought to do, even when this conflicts with what they want to do. The psychological egoist can reply that they must be doing what they want to do; after all, no one is forcing them, e.g. to give money to charity.

This reply shows that the egoist is saying that acting voluntarily and doing what you want are the same thing. But this assumes what needs to be proven, viz. that only our desires can motivate us, and reason can’t. If reason can motivate us, then sometimes when people act voluntarily, they are doing what they believe is reasonable, not what they want to do.

Second, we can object that even when we do what we want, this doesn’t mean that we are acting on self-interest. Altruism – unselfishness – is the desire to help other people, even at a cost to oneself. Even if people always do what they want, this doesn’t show
that what they want is always something *for themselves*. We can want good things for other people, and can choose to give up good things for ourselves in order to help other people get something good.

**Pleasure and desire**

Suppose the psychological egoist is right that we always have a feeling of pleasure, or avoid guilt, when acting unselfishly. This doesn’t mean that *the reason why* we act unselfishly is in order to get this feeling. If you ask someone who is giving money to charity why they are doing so, they will probably say ‘in order to help other people’.

The psychological egoist claims this answer is false – that the real answer is ‘in order to feel good about myself’. But this is a confusion. Just because the person gets pleasure from the action doesn’t mean that what they really wanted – what they were motivated by – was the pleasure they would get. To desire pleasure is a particular desire; just as desiring pleasure is distinct from desiring knowledge, it is also distinct from desiring to help other people. If the psychological egoist is right, we only have one kind of desire – the desire for pleasure – and so there is really no distinction between wanting pleasure, wanting knowledge, wanting to help. But we say that helping someone in order to feel good about yourself and helping someone because they really need it are quite different.