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KANTIAN PHILOSOPHY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Immanuel Kant's ethical theory is one of the most influential theories in Western philosophical history. While this is the case, how to interpret and apply Kant's theory is the subject of lively debate within both theoretical philosophy and applied philosophy.

One of the complicating factors in understanding Kant's theory is that some of the terms he uses do not easily translate into contemporary English. For instance, Kant claims that humanity has a dignity or worth that elevates humanity above all else in nature. This claim is often taken as meaning that humanity has the highest value—that it is more valuable than any and all nonhuman entities. However, Kant does not take “dignity” to imply such a value claim. Instead, “dignity” is to be understood as a status that humanity has in virtue of its capacity for moral agency. The dignity of humanity, then, is to be understood in the sense that those who hold positions of influence are held in high esteem. Those who hold such positions are highly esteemed and considered special because of the role they play in society and the accompanying responsibilities.

Consider, for example, governmental officials such as politicians and police officers. Politicians are special in the sense that they are charged with the responsibility of honestly representing the values of their constituents when shaping and creating laws and public policy. Police officers are special in the sense that they are charged with the power to enforce laws. However, politicians and police officers are not special in the sense that they are inherently more valuable than others who do not hold those positions. Instead, they are special because of their respective responsibilities. Similarly, for Kant, humans are special (i.e., have a dignity) because of the moral responsibilities they have. So, because we are free to act according to any principles we choose, we are autonomous; because we are autonomous, we have the capacity for moral agency; because we have the capacity for moral agency, we have moral responsibilities, and these responsibilities are what give us a dignity.

The dignity of others in itself does not ground our duties to them. Put differently, your dignity is not the reason that a person has moral obligations to you. Instead, it is the person's own unconditional commitment to following the moral law and the dictates of the moral law that generate my moral obligations to you. So, it is not the other who morally obligates an individual, but his or her commitment to following the moral law's dictates for how a person should treat you.

Kant's ethical theory, then, is one of individual moral responsibility: the fundamental focus is the individual (from the first-person perspective); it is about the individual's moral development. The implication of this view is that the primary focus of morality is not the other's well-being, but how an individual responds to the well-being of others.

This understanding is both useful and important when responding to those who criticize Kant's theory with regard to the morally proper treatment of animals and inanimate nature. Kant's explicit view is that moral agents can have no direct duties to nonmoral agents, and that any duties we feel we have to them are actually duties to humanity. While Kant does claim that we are to avoid callousness and indifference toward animals, it is not the animals themselves that matter morally. For when we avoid such treatment or even treat them well, the duty is not to the animal but to humanity. Based on the autonomistic, individualistic interpretation of Kant's theory, we can see that the above criticism loses strength, since the primary focus of morality is not even other humans but one's own moral development.

One of the main points of contention within these debates is the distinction between Kant's personal views and his philosophical defense of his theory. According to Kant scholars (i.e., scholars who devote most or all of their philosophical careers to understanding and interpreting Kant's works), Kant's writing (in German) is difficult to understand because he is not always careful with the terms he uses and the style of his writing is confusing at times. Consequently, translating Kant's work into English is not as easy as directly translating the text—it also requires an understanding of his historical context and the common style of writing during his time. The reason for pointing this out is that many of the critical views of Kant, especially within the field of environmental ethics, do not seem to account for some of the difficulties in not only understanding Kant's theory but also its application to real-world situations. So, the primary aim of this article is to clarify some of the misunderstandings of Kant's theory as it has been applied to the question "How ought we to treat nonhuman nature?"

Even though traditional anthropocentric ethical theories are thought to provide a faulty foundation for a proper environmental ethic, some environmental ethical theories are based on revisions of traditional ethical theories. In particular, Kant's conception of intrinsic value and the role it plays within his ethical theory has significantly influenced many nonanthropocentric environmental ethical theories. While the implications of Kant's ethics for both nonhuman animals and the natural environment were considered "abhorrent" within the charter group of environmental ethicists, Kant's ethics nonetheless provided a framework for how to conceptualize the relationship between intrinsic value and moral obligation. Furthermore, since the capacity for rationality was thought to unreasonably restrict the moral community (i.e., the category of individuals to which direct moral consideration is owed), nonanthropocentrists began proposing various alternatives to rationality—such as Tom Regan's "subject of a life," Peter Singer's "sentience," Aldo Leopold's "ecosystem," and Albert Schweitzer's "will to live"—as appropriate intrinsic value-conferring properties. Thus, by implementing their understanding of Kant's concept of the relationship between intrinsic value and direct moral duties, nonanthropocentrists began developing theories that aimed at extending moral value and moral considerability well beyond humanity.

The major problem with Kant's ethical theory, as understood by the nonanthropocentrists, is that it is ultimately based on a particular conception of value—namely, the intrinsic value of humanity. Since Kant's ethical theory is (allegedly) founded on the absolute or intrinsic value of humanity (i.e., moral agency), moral agents are the only beings to which

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direct moral duties are owed; all other earthly entities are mere means and moral agents have no binding moral duties concerning their welfare or preservation.

While the nonanthropocentrists' interpretation of Kant's ethical theory is in line with the conventional textbook interpretation of Kant's theory, it is not the only defensible reading available. The alternative reading, which can be called the "autonomistic interpretation," is fundamentally different from the conventional one in that the former does not take the value of humanity as the foundation of Kant's ethical theory; and removing value as the foundation allows Kant's ethics to be interpreted as helping us to understand our morally proper relationship to and with nonhuman existents.

The general implication of this alternate interpretation of Kant's ethical theory for developing an ethic of the environment is that we ought to live up to the dignity of our humanity, which means that we ought to widely develop our feelings of compassion and sympathy for all sentient beings and our appreciation and awareness of natural beauty. By developing such human capacities, we more deeply explore our own humanity.

From this interpretation, it is easy to see the connection between Kant's theory and the American transcendentalists—namely Henry David Thoreau—who also had a significant impact on the development of contemporary environmental ethics.

See Also: Animal Ethics; Anthropocentrism; Emerson, Ralph Waldo; Intrinsic Value; Leopold, Aldo; "Should Trees Have Standing?"; Singer, Peter; Thoreau, Henry David.

Further Readings

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