

## **What is so special about Kant's moral philosophy? (And why should we tell you?)**

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*Abstract.* The title question arises because the philosophy seems the same as asking, "What if everyone did that?" In this paper, I give a partial response to the question. In an appendix, I consider the question "Why should we tell you the answer?"

It seems we are in FAQ level, or at least I am: where you have to address all the questions that "everyone" has. Of course, part of the problem is working out what questions they have. I picked up this question from a website: what is so special about Kant, or what is so special about Kant's moral philosophy?

Kant addresses the issue of whether there is a fundamental principle from which all moral requirements can be derived and, if so, what it is. The person who posed the specialness question thinks of Kant as saying roughly the following: "Yes, there is a fundamental principle from which the whole of morality can be derived. Take something that someone does or is planning to do, e.g. break a promise because it is to their advantage. Ask whether everyone could do the same thing or if that would lead to social breakdown. If everyone could do the same thing, then the action is morally permissible. If not, then the action is morally impermissible."

I am going to suppose that this is the correct way of understanding Kant. I am also going to suppose that the practice of asking, "What if everyone did that?" was widespread before Kant gave his answer. And I am going to suppose that there is a large resemblance

between the practice and what Kant recommends. (Let us go “all the way”<sup>1</sup> and suppose that Kant did not make any other contributions to philosophy.)

So given what we are supposing, there is a puzzle about why anyone would be impressed by Kant’s philosophy. But a Kant admirer might say the following: “Imagine asking as many people as possible whether there is a fundamental principle from which the whole of morality can be derived and if so, what it is. I suspect that a lot of people would not give or even conceive of Kant’s answer unless they have already been taught Kant, despite engaging in the practice. It is one thing to sometimes engage in the practice of encouraging people to be moral by asking ‘What if everyone did that?’ It is another thing to realize that one can take this practice and turn it into a response to the question of whether there is a fundamental moral principle. Since I do not think many people would do that and since I think the response is worth considering, I am impressed by Kant.”

I think the person who wondered what is so special about Kant is making an assumption, one which seems very plausible to begin with: *if the answer someone gives to a question closely resembles something that many other people say, then that answer is not impressive*. An exception to this assumption is if those other people would not connect what they say back to the question, when doing so provides an answer worth considering.

**A different question.** I think lots of people would independently realize the answer I have given to the Kant specialness question (which may not be the very best answer). Someone might wonder then, “Why is it so hard to get an answer to the question? Why is it not in any introduction to Kant?” But that leads on to another question, which I suspect is frequently asked, albeit by other people. Let us imagine a person who is interested in

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<sup>1</sup> “Is that going all the way? What about supposing that it is logically impossible for him to make any other contributions?” “Would having that limitation not itself be a further contribution, making that supposition contradictory?”

philosophy. They have some way of rating philosophers which is not at all strange. For example, they value system-builders<sup>2</sup> over paradox-makers, paradox-makers over philosophers who just contribute to the field by making objections (which are not paradoxes), and objection-makers over mere interpreters. They have passed their examinations, have not cheated anyone, and are now even in a position where they can hire and fire philosophers – or contributors to the field of philosophy, if “philosopher” is too grand a word. They are puzzled by the value attached to Kant’s moral philosophy and they cannot seem to work out any answer by themselves as to why it is valued. From their perspective, the philosophy is merely “What if everyone did that?” You might think not addressing their puzzle is a kind of injustice – they have come quite far and no one is telling them the answer. However, they attach very little value to a person who contributes to philosophy largely by addressing this puzzle and other puzzles they have about the field. Despite the effort they have put into getting somewhere in the field, is it an injustice to never answer their question, neither publicly nor in more enclosed settings, unless they revise their approach to rating contributors to philosophy? It is not clearly an injustice, because of the low value they attach to the task. Furthermore, here is a worry: “The kind of power you are after requires being able to work out answers to those questions.” But it may be that the field of philosophy cannot realize its potential without publicly answering those questions.

## Reference

Author unknown. 2011. What’s so special about philosophers like Kant, Wittgenstein and Nietzsche? *Quora*. Available at:

<https://www.quora.com/Whats-so-special-about-philosophers-like-Kant-Wittgenstein-and-Nietzsche#>

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<sup>2</sup> The strong men and strong women of philosophy!