
DAVID HUME & IMMANUEL KANT

TWO KEY PHILOSOPHERS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT



SCOTLAND

Both confirmed bachelors and popular authors but with many friends



Prussia

DAVID HUME 1711-1776

- He attended Edinburgh University from the age of twelve (or possibly even younger?)
- Metaphysical Naturalist: base conclusions on observing nature and rejected “superstitious explanations” (principles of “materialism” first enunciated by Anaximander 610-546 BC)
- Warned against assumption that the rationalist approach was foolproof (you can prove anything with statistics?)
- Cause and effect easily misunderstood and observation of “constant conjunction” does not prove cause and effect (nowadays we say “correlation doesn’t prove causation”)
- Criticized “Is-Ought” statements: Hume’s law states that an ethical argument cannot be based on the status quo (e.g. Medieval church)
- “Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.” This is how we make moral judgements. (I think that nowadays we might talk about decisions based on “gut feelings”).
- The logical next step from the above is “Moral sense theory” which argues that all moral norms are related to human sentiment and the distinctions between morality and immorality are discovered by emotional responses to experience.

DAVID HUME 1711-1776

Because he attacked naïve superstition and religious belief, he never got the university posting that his talents deserved. Friends persuaded him to delay his book “Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion” until after his death – eventually published 3 yrs after his death.

When he was dying, James Boswell asked whether he was worried about what would happen to him. He replied that he had no more concern for this than he had for the time before he was born – but he never admitted to being an atheist.



“She was the best theologian I ever met!”

IMMANUEL KANT (1724-1804)

- Brought up in a strict Lutheran tradition.
- Early work on cosmology included a theory that the solar system arose from a rotating cloud of gas and that the Milky Way was a great mass of stars or nebula and this “home nebula” was probably one of many.
- In his book “Critique of pure reason” he proposed *Transcendental Realism*: that human senses only give a vague impression of reality and philosophy must transcend these limitations (c.f. van Leeuwenhoek & The Royal Society 1773).
- His rational view of morality differed from Hume’s: “Everything in nature works in accordance with laws (*arbitrium brutum*). Only a rational being has the power to act in accordance with his idea of laws – that is in accordance with principles – and only so he has his will.”
- In 1739 he credited Hume for awakening him from a “dogmatic slumber” in which he had fully accepted religious and rationalist dogmas (including Natural Philosophy)
- Despite doubts about traditional religion, he believed that one has to accept unproven belief in 1) a deity, 2) the immortal soul, 3) free will – to sustain a moral code. This should be embodied in the law and it was a civic duty to obey unless those in power consistently fall short of their own code of behaviour
- His ***Categorical Imperative*** states that actions should not be judged by their outcome even if judged to be good but by the motivation for the action in relation to society. It is a matter of doing one’s duty to Mankind.

IMMANUEL KANT (1724-1804)

In “Religion within the Boundaries of bare Reason” Kant outlined a defensible rational core of Christian belief and yet rejected the possibility of theoretical proofs for the existence of God. The book included strong criticism of ritual, superstition and the church hierarchy which got him into trouble with the king’s censor.

Kant said: “Out of the crooked timber of humanity nothing straight was ever made.”

BEFORE HITLER AND THE NAZIS

Influenced by Kant and the other enlightenment philosophers, Friedrich Niethammer not only introduced the term “Humanism” but was involved in educational reforms in **Bavaria** in 1806. His opposite number, the diplomat, linguist and humanistic philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt of Prussia was tasked with reforming the **Prussian** system in 1809. They believed that people should learn to think for themselves which was total anathema to Hitler.

COMPARE & CONTRAST HUME AND KANT ON MORALITY

HUME

- Moral code determined by human sentiment and this involves sentimental mindsets that are largely held in common.
- The citizen cannot be expected to simply submit to rules laid down by the state which would be like the lot of a press-ganged sailor expected to be grateful for his bunk and food.
- Lists the following virtues when relating to others: good manners, politeness, wit, ingenuity, decency, cleanliness, and a graceful or genteel manner.
- Believed in “Scientific racism” as self evident in terms of European superiority in culture, science and morality. He was actively involved in the slavery trade and in 1766 encouraged his patron, Lord Hereford, to invest in a number of slave plantations.

KANT

- Moral code determined by ruling authority based on rational principals starting with the assumption that there is a God, a human immortal souls and free will.
- We should submit to the state insofar as it embodies laws that any rational being would consider just. This was his model of patriotism.
- Lists following virtues when relating to others: Have moral strength to avoid the vices of arrogance, envy, defamation, and ridicule and promote happiness by means of beneficence, sympathy, and gratitude (duties of love and vices opposed to them).
- Believed in “Scientific racism” but his attitude to non-European’s mellowed with age (he lived 28 years longer than Hume reaching the age of 80 yrs whilst Hume died aged 65 yrs).

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DISCUSS...

