



Topic: Kantian Ethics

Option:

Essential Richer Reading – you must read this for your lessons ☐

Recommended Richer Reading – advised as it would enhance your understanding further ☒

Further Richer Reading – widening your knowledge beyond A-levels ☐

Richer Reading title: Eichmann's Trial Invokes Kant

Type: Website Peped: [Eichmann's trial invokes Kant - Philosophical Investigations \(peped.org\)](http://peped.org/Eichmann's%20trial%20invokes%20Kant%20-%20Philosophical%20Investigations)

Reading intention: (*importance of the text, what students will gain from it*)

- Important as a piece of history after WW2 involving the trial of Eichmann and the “use” of ethical theories in real life
- Gain an insight into the application of Kantian Ethics through historical events.

Core content to take away:

- How ethical theories i.e. Kant, can be used to defend abhorrent acts
- Being able to personally analyse whether ethical theories are applied correctly and critique how they have been/can be misused.

Exam help...

- Could be utilised in AO2 aspect of essay, using the questions below as triggering questions to formulate arguments regarding the weaknesses/misuse of Kant and coming to personal conclusions

Task for this reading:

Optional: to get some context you might want to quickly have a brief look at who Eichman was: [Adolf Eichmann - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Eichmann)

1. Read through the trial, highlight the significant references to Kantian Ethics
2. “Be true to the law, obedient, live an upright personal life, do not to come into conflict with the law”. Is this an adequate summary of Kant’s ethics?
3. Alasdair MacIntyre observes that you can universalise almost anything. Does Eichmann’s life confirm this?
4. Eichmann argues that he cannot be blamed as he had to follow orders as a “small man” in the system. Kant also said those who were living under heteronomy (other-directed) could not be responsible, but only those who were truly autonomous. Would Kant have supported Eichmann’s defence?

June 26, 2010

At his trial Eichmann is cross-examined about his statement that he'd tried to live all his life by Kant's categorical imperative. He states clearly that "he built obedience to the authorities into Kant's concept". He also implies, however, that he was compelled to follow orders and so could not be blamed, as a subordinate, for what he was commanded to do. When Hannah Arendt watched the trial she described it as "the banality of evil".

For a full text go to:

The Trial of Adolf Eichmann Session 105 (Part 4 of 4)

Judge Raveh: I shall ask you a few questions in German. Do you remember at one point in your police interrogation talking about the Kantian imperative, and saying that throughout your entire life you had tried to live according to the Kantian imperative?

Eichmann: Yes.

Q. What did you mean by the Kantian imperative when you said that?

A. I meant by this that the principle of my will and the principle of my life must be such that it could at any time be raised to be the principle of a universal law, as Kant puts it in his categorical imperative.

Q. I see, therefore, that when you said this you were precisely aware of Kant's categorical imperative?

A. Yes, I was.

Q. And so, do you mean to say by this that your activities in the course of deporting Jews corresponded to the categorical imperative?

A. No, certainly not, because these activities...at that time I had to live and act under compulsion, and the compulsion of a third person, during exceptional times. I meant by this living according to the Kantian principle, to the extent that I am my own master and able to organize my life according to my will and according to my wishes. This is also quite obvious, in fact it could not be meant any other way, because if I am subjected to a higher power and a higher force, then my free will as such is eliminated, and then, since I can no longer be master of my free will and volition, I cannot in fact adopt any principles whatsoever which I cannot influence, but, on the contrary, I must, and also may, build obedience to the authorities into this concept, and then the authorities bear the responsibility. In my judgment, that also belongs to the categorical imperative.

Q. Do you mean to say by this that following the authorities' orders blindly signifies realizing the Kantian categorical imperative?

A. Since the Kantian imperative was laid down, there had never been such a destructive and unprecedented order from a head of state. That is why it was new, and that is why there is no possibility of comparisons, and no...one cannot have any idea of how it was. There was the War. I had to do just one thing. I had to obey, because I could not change anything. And so I just placed my life, as far as I could, in the service – I would put it this way – of this Kantian demand. And I have already said that in fact others had to answer for the fundamental aspect. As a minor recipient of orders, I had to obey, I could not evade that.

Q. I understood from the first part of your answer that you meant that these years in which you were a blind

recipient of orders would be excluded from life according to the Kantian imperative. And I intended to ask you about this, from when till when did it last? But then you added something, and that again changed the whole thing. Now I do not know what your final position is on this.

A. Killing people violently cannot be according to the spirit of the Kantian imperative, because in principle it is not something God-given.

Q. That means that there was a time when you did not live by the categorical imperative?

A. Could not live, because higher powers made it impossible for me to live by it.

Q. From when to when was this?

A. Strictly speaking, that was from the moment when I was transferred against my will, and against my wishes, to Berlin.

Q. Till when?

A. Until the end.

Q. And throughout this time it was clear to you that during that period you could not live by the categorical imperative, although you had in principle arranged actually to live your life by it?

A. During this time I read Kant's Critique of Practical Reason.

Q. For the first time?

A. Then was the first time.

Q. So that it was only then that you encountered the idea of the categorical concept?

A. I had come across this earlier, but I had not concerned myself particularly with it; instead, the Kantian categorical imperative was disposed of shortly as follows: "be true to the law, obedient, live an upright personal life, do not to come into conflict with the law." This, I would say, was the categorical imperative for an ordinary person.

Q. From where had you taken this definition of the categorical imperative for the ordinary man? When you read Kant later, did you find it corresponded to his definition?

A. No, I sensed this earlier on, because for someone like myself it is not possible to understand all of the subject of Kant completely; instead, I only took from these writings what I could understand, and what my imagination could somehow grasp.

Q. So I understand that you learned the true concept at the time you were dealing with the deportation of Jews?

A. As to whether it was the genuine complete concept of the categorical imperative, I am still not able to grasp even today, but I have grasped one thing – that giving such orders by a supreme head of state cannot accord with the spirit of a divine order. But now I was trying to come to terms with myself, and I saw that I was unable to change anything and unable to do anything.

Q. What interests me more now is whether then, in the years when you came to Berlin – against your will, as you put it – until 1945, whether during that period you were aware, or became aware, that you were not living according to Kant's categorical imperative?

A. I first became aware of this in Kulm. But it would not be right for me to say I became aware that I was not living according to this Kantian requirement, but I said to myself: I cannot for the present live entirely according to it, although I would like to do so.