

# Kantian Ethics

Onora O'Neill, "A Simplified

# Deontological Ethics

- **Consequentialism**: only consequence of actions are relevant to moral evaluation (e.g. Utilitarianism)
- **Deontological Ethics**: the nature of the act itself, regardless of the consequences, is only of relevance
- **Objective (today)**: consider Kant's Deontological Theory

# Motivations for Deontology

- Morality without God
- Alleged problems with Consequentialism
  - Not precise: difficult to predict long-term consequences of an action
  - Too demanding: asks too much of us to help the world
- Deontology is an intuitive view: recall reactions to Trolley Problem

# Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

- Influential German philosopher in ethics and metaphysics, epistemology
- A central figure of the Enlightenment Period
- *Critique of Pure Reason* –metaphysical and epistemological work
- *Metaphysics of Moral* – ethical work



# Onora O'Neill (1941-)

- British political philosopher and public servant
- Studied with John Rawls at Harvard University
- A Public advocate for Deontological Ethics

# Formula of the End in Itself

- Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, **never simply as a (mere) means** but ... **as an end in themselves.**
- Each of our acts reflects one or more maxims
  - The maxim of the act is the principle on which one sees oneself as acting
  - A maxim expresses a person's policy, or the particular intention or decision
- Example:
  - **Intention:** "This year I'll give 10 percent of my income to famine relief"
  - **Maxim:** I want to give some of my income for famine relief.

# Treating someone as a Mere Means

- There is nothing wrong in using someone as a means to an end
  - E.g. using a cashier; cashier using you; This is permitted because both parties consent
- But, we should never use someone as a **mere means (tool)**
  - To use someone as a mere means is to involve them in a scheme of action to which they **could not in principle consent.**
- Example: Deception
  - one person may make a promise to another with every intention of breaking it
  - Since the person who is deceived doesn't know the real maxim, he or she can't in principle consent to his or her part in the proposed scheme of action. The person who is deceived is a prop or a tool-a mere means-in the false promisor's scheme.
- Example: Coercion
  - If a moneylender in a poor village threatens not to renew a vital loan unless he is given the debtor's land, then he uses the debtor as a mere means. He coerces the debtor, who cannot truly consent to this "offer he can't refuse."
  - creditor's intention is to coerce; and the debtor cannot consent to his part in the scheme

# Treating People as Ends in Themselves

- One should also seek to foster some of others' plans and maxims by sharing some of their ends. To act beneficently is to seek others' happiness, therefore to intend to achieve some of the things that those others aim at with their maxims.



# Two Kinds of Duties

- **Duties of Justice** requires that we act on no maxims that use others as mere means.
- **Duties of Beneficence** requires that we act on **some maxims** that foster others' ends, though it is a matter for judgment and discretion which of their ends we foster.

# Objection 1: The Inquiring Murderer

- **Objection:**

- Suppose a distraught screaming stranger runs through your doorway and into your house, disappearing upstairs. A couple of minutes later a known fugitive and convict knocks on your door with a gun in his hand. He asks if you have seen a person, matching the description of the stranger.
- On Kant's view, Lying to the murderer would treat him as a mere means to another end, the lie denies the rationality of another person, and therefore denies the possibility of there being free rational action at all.
- But, this is morally wrong: we shouldn't tell the murderer who is upstairs.

- **Reply:**

- "not lying" is not the same as "telling the truth". Clearly, one is under no positive obligation to assist a murderer by telling him the truth. Saying nothing is not the same as lying. So, one may refuse to answer, or even choose to challenge the murderer, without trying to deceive him.
- Is this an adequate response?

# Objection 2: Disaster Scenarios

- Suppose you are in a situation where you are asked to kill one person to save 19. If you do not do as you are told, all 20 will be killed by someone else.
- What should you do? Kant claims that you should never kill a person, doing so is a violation. And if you do it, you will have done something wrong!

# Charity

- Kantian theory forbids us from using people as a mere means (Justice)
- But there is only a requirement for us to be beneficent *some* of the time and money to help others (Beneficence)
- Questions
  - How much should we give to others?
  - Are there no special obligations to help those during famine?
  - Is any kind of charity equally good?

# Famine Relief: Prohibitions

- O'Neill thinks that not using people as means would go a long way during famines
  1. where there is a rationing scheme, one ought not to cheat
  2. transactions that are outwardly sales can be coercive when the consumer is desperate (E.g. selling water for high prices to those in dire need)

# Priority of Famine Relief

- ▶ Primary task of beneficence should be developing others' capacity to pursue their own ends – in particular, in parts of the world where extreme poverty and hunger leave people unable to pursue any of their other ends
- ▶ Why? Benevolence directed at putting people in a position to pursue whatever ends they may have has a stronger claim on us than beneficence directed at sharing ends with those who are already in a position to pursue varieties of ends
- ▶ it is more important to make people able to plan their own lives to a minimal extent
- ▶ Reason to help education [development of reason faculty]

# Kant / Singer Comparison

- Scope
  - Kant: limited scope; does **not** classify every act as right or wrong
  - Singer: unlimited scope; classifies every act as right or wrong
- Wealth
  - Kant: Nothing hangs on how much you have
  - Singer: You will have to give more if you have more (say 20% of income)
- Amount
  - Kant: have to give some of the time, but not generally required to give
  - Singer: comparison of alternative – always have an obligation to give to others (comparative moral importance)
- Pond Scenario:
  - Singer: you should save the child
  - Kant: you don't have an obligation to save the child; you did nothing wrong by not doing anything

# Who is Worthy of Moral Consideration

- Kant:
  - Only rational creatures can offer consent
  - Only rational persons are worthy of moral consideration
  
  - How could Kant's say that we shouldn't harm animals or the severely handicapped?
- Bentham/Mill
  - Calculate the happiness i.e. pleasure and pain of all involved
  - All creatures that experience pleasure and pain are worthy of moral consideration
  
  - Is this true?



# Deontology and Famine Relief

Onora O'Neill, "The Moral Perplexities of Famine Relief"



# Epistemological Objection to Utilitarianism

- An objection to both Bentham and Mill is that it is difficult to know what the long term consequences are going to be, and so it is difficult to make a decision on utilitarian grounds.
- Reply (Bentham/Mill):
  - We have plenty of evidence to make decisions including evidence and personal experiences from our own life, and evidence from the past.
  - The cases from history can be analogous to count as evidence. Example: Should we engage in a War in Iraq? Look at past evidence – track record of US military engagements, track record of other countries involved in military action in Iraq, etc.
  - We don't need absolute certainty, but evidence that suggests at least what is probably going to happen, and for this Bentham and Mill think past evidence is good enough to make a reasonable decision.

# Overview

- Rejects Utilitarianism
- Individual has a dignity
  - Not because we own ourselves
  - Not because we seek pleasure
  - Because we are all rational beings – capable of acting rationally on any given occasion
  - For Kant, rationality is central to an important kind of freedom

# Personhood, Rationality and Freedom

- A person has a dignity
  - Not because we own ourselves nor because we seek pleasure
  - Because we are all rational beings – capable of acting rationally on any given occasion
  - Kant rejects – that what is central to morality is pleasure/pain
- What are persons? Things capable of acting freely.
- **Freedom** = having alternatives (common-sense freedom)
- **Kant: Strong View of Human Freedom**
  - When act to satisfy desires for pain/pleasure, we are slaves to pain/pleasure; this is not freedom
    - Velleman – sleeping in, when should be swimming
  - Free = To act autonomously (freely) is to act in accordance to a law (rule) I choose myself
- Opposite of Free; Heteronomy = acting on a desire (inclination) that I haven't chosen myself

# Freedom

- Freedom = having alternatives (common-sense freedom)
- Strong View of Human Freedom (Kant)
  - When act to satisfy desires for pain/pleasure, we are slaves to pain/pleasure; This is not freedom
  - Free = To act autonomously (freely) is to act in accordance to a law (rule) I choose myself
- Opposite of Free; Heteronomy = acting on a desire (inclination) that I haven't chosen myself

- When we act to realize ends of our inclination, we are mere instruments for our desires, and so not acting freely
- When we act freely i.e. when we act in accordance with a rule which we have chosen
  - We start to be authors of our actions (not of our desires)
  - We do something for its own sake
  - We become ends in ourselves – not as tools for something else
- Acting freely gives people dignity, makes them worthy of respect
- This is why it is wrong to use people for the sake of other peoples happiness

# Absolute Value

- Utilitarianism: Absolute Value
  - Only one thing has absolute value: pleasure
  - Everything else is done for the sake of pleasure
- Kant: Only a “Good Will” has absolute Value
  - Values: Talent, Intelligence, Pleasant Sensation are valuable but not of absolute value



# Moral Worth

- What gives an action its moral worth?
- What makes an action morally worthy has to do with the motives, quality of will, or intention – the reason why an action is performed
- A good will must be done for the sake of moral law and this confers moral worth on an action
- The only good motive is doing something for the sake of duty – done because its right thing to do

# Illustration: Shop Keeper

- A shop-keeper who charges the same prices for selling his goods to inexperienced customers as for selling them to anyone else. This is in accord with duty.
- **An added complication:** But there is also a prudential and not-duty-based motive that the shop-keeper might have for this course of conduct: when there is a buyers' market, he may sell as cheaply to children as to others so as not to lose customers. Thus the customer is honestly served, but his conduct or policy on pricing comes neither from duty nor from directly wanting it, but from a selfish purpose. So, it is wrong.
- The shop-keeper does want to treat all his customers equitably; his intention is aimed at precisely that fact. But the shop-keeper's intention doesn't stop there, so to speak; he wants to treat his customers equitably not because of what he wants for them, but because of how he wants them to behave later, specifically, so that his person interest is served.
- E.g. A Corporation giving to charity – it's a good thing but the motive is about profitability: increases reputation, which is marketable, which is in the end about increasing profit.

# Principles and Rationality

- Kant distinguishes two kinds of principles: subjective, objective
  - **Subjective (maxims):** principle you act on, you set out for yourself
  - **Objective (imperatives):** principles which you ought to be following i.e. principles are the principles a rational person follow
- Kant distinguishes two kinds of rationality
  - **Hypothetical (conditional):** if you want X, you should do Y
    - E.g. if you want your car to run efficiently, always change your oil every 3000 miles
    - E.g. if you want to avoid a fine then pay your parking ticket
  - **Categorical (unconditional):** you should do Y, no matter what you want
- Morality is based on Categorical Reasoning Only

# Supreme Principle of Morality: Categorical Imperative

- “so if the will is to be called absolutely good without qualification; what kind of law can this be? Since I have robbed the will of any impulses that could come to it from obeying any law, nothing remains to serve as a ‘guiding’ principle of the will except conduct’s universally conforming to law as such.”
- **That is, I ought never to act in such a way that I couldn’t also will that the maxim on which I act should be a universal law.**

# 3 Formulations of the Categorical Imperative

- Kant presents CI in several different formulations; he says that they condone and forbid the same moral actions, but one may be easier to apply in specific cases.
- CI 1: Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature
- CI 2: Never treat others as tools, rather only as ends in themselves
- CI 3: Acting on universal laws which make the kingdom of ends (a state where all individuals act rationally on universal laws) possible.

# 1<sup>st</sup> Formulation

- ‘Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature’.
- A law of nature specifies an absolute regularity.
  - E.g. the law that pure water boils under normal atmospheric conditions at 100 degrees centigrade is a law of nature: pure water *always boils under these conditions*.
- *Laws of nature would be laws*
  - *(a) applying to everyone and (b) which everyone always follows.*
- To imagine the maxim of my proposed action as a universal law of nature, I imagine that everyone always does the kind of act I propose doing when they are in the circumstances I am in

# Test for CI

- 1. Formulate maxim: whenever *I* need money, I will get it by making a false promise to repay it
- 2. The universal law corresponding to the maxim is: whenever anyone needs money, he or she will get it by making a false promise to repay it
- 3. Test in one of two ways:
  - 1. Can I conceive that the maxim becomes a universal law?
  - 2. Even if I can conceive of its becoming a universal law of nature, can I *will that it become a universal law of nature?*

	<b>Perfect Duties</b>	<b>Imperfect Duties</b>
To Self	Never commit suicide	Develop some of one's talents
To Others	Never make deceitful promise	To help some others in distress



# Case: Suicide

- Is suicide permitted for a depressed person if he or she reasons as follows?
- a) To stay alive would be far less good for me than bad
- b) I love myself
- c) Because I love myself I do not want to see myself suffer.
- d) Therefore, I ought to commit suicide to end my suffering.

# Suicide: 1<sup>st</sup> Formulation

- **Maxim:** I want to commit suicide to improve my condition (i.e. to help me stop suffering)
- **Generalize Maxim:** Suppose everyone acted on the maxims that committing suicide to improve the condition
- **Test 1:** Is it conceivable that the generalized maxim become a universal law of nature?
  - Kant thinks it is contradictory to commit suicide out of self-love. It is contradictory because self-love is the very thing which motivates us to improve our lives, and ending our life is not an improvement
- Because the Maxim fails the conceivability test, we have a perfect duty **not** to commit suicide out of self-love

# Deceitful Promise: 1<sup>st</sup> Formulation

- **Maxim:** I want to borrow money and pretend that I will pay it back
- **Generalize Maxim:** Suppose everyone acted on the maxims that borrowing money with no intention to pay the money back
- **Test 1:** Is it conceivable that the generalized maxim become a universal law of nature?
  - Kant thinks it is not possible; promises simply would not exist if no one fulfilled their promises.
- Because the maxim fails the conceivability test (test 1), we have a perfect duty **not** to make deceitful promises

# Imperfect duties

- “Can I will that my maxim be a universal law of nature? In other words, all things considered, do I really desire my maxim to become a universal law of nature?” or “Could I, in *every* situation, accept this maxim as law?” “
- An imperfect duty is one which:
  - 1) is conceivable as a universal law
  - 2) a rational agent cannot will that it become a universal law of nature

# Wasting Your Talents

- What if one is financially independent and is also exceptionally talented? What then does she owe, if anything to her talent? Is it okay for her “to indulge in pleasure rather than to take pains in enlarging and improving her happy natural capacities?”
- Kant notes that it is possible for people - even an entire culture - to neglect their talents *in fact*, to devote their lives to idle amusement. But the *moral* question is, is it *proper*?

# Wasting Your Talent

- Again we can run through the 1<sup>st</sup> Formulation
- **Maxim:** I will avoid exercising my own talents for idle amusement
- **Generalize Maxim:** Everyone avoids exercising their own talents for idle amusement
- **Test 1:** Is it conceivable? Yes, it is possible that everyone avoids developing their own talents
- **Test 2:** No. It is not something a rational person would will to become a universal law
  - He cannot will that we ought to neglect our talents since it is by means of our talents that we develop and improve our lives, and this is what a rational being aims for.
  - That is, a rational being will necessarily will that his abilities be developed since they are useful to him, and serve any number of purposes. Accordingly, he cannot at the same time will that they be neglected without contradicting himself.

# Treatment of Animals

- Only rational persons are worthy of moral consideration. So, in the generalization step of the First Test, we generalize over rational human beings. But, what about animals, or the severely handicapped?
- Kant said that we have a duty not to harm animals because we have a duty to develop ourselves, and that entails being compassionate towards others

# Objection 1: The Inquiring Murderer

- Suppose a distraught screaming stranger runs through your doorway and into your house disappearing upstairs. A couple of minutes later a known fugitive and convict knocks on your door with a gun in his hand. He asks if you have seen a person, matching the description of the stranger.
- Lying to the murderer would treat him as a mere means to another end, the lie denies the rationality of another person, and therefore denies the possibility of there being free rational action at all.
- It is important to note here that "not lying" is not the same as "telling the truth". Clearly, one is under no positive obligation to assist a murderer by telling him the truth. Saying nothing is not the same as lying. So, one may refuse to answer, or even choose to challenge the murderer, without trying to deceive him.
- Is this an adequate response?



# Objection 2: Moral Dilemmas

- Suppose you are in a situation where you are asked to kill one person to save 19. If you do not do as you are told, all 20 will be killed by someone else.
- What should you do? Kant claims that you should never kill a person, doing so violates the Categorical imperative. And if you do it, you will have done something wrong!

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Formulation of the Categorical Imperative

- “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity ... never simply as a means but always ... as an end”
- We are permitted to use persons as means as long as they consent explicitly or implicitly

# Duties of Justice

- ▶ Never use people as mere means i.e. **involve them in a scheme of action to which they could not in principle consent**
  - **deception** making a false promise with every intention of breaking it – using a person as means to an end i.e. they cannot consent to the false promise, because if they knew of the true intentions they wouldn't accept the promise – a promise would not be made
  - **coercion**: A rich person threatens a debtor with bankruptcy unless he or she joins in some scheme – the creditor's intention is to coerce; and the debtor, if coerced, cannot consent to his or her part in the creditor's scheme

# Duties of Beneficence

- ▶ Even if we don't treat others as means to an end, we can fail to treat them as ends in themselves
- ▶ Beneficence requires that we act on **some** maxims that foster another's ends, though it is a matter of judgment which of their ends we foster

# Problems?

- Kantian theory forbids us from using people as a mere means (Justice)
- But there is only a requirement for us to be beneficent *some* of the time (Beneficence)
- Two Problems:
  - How much should we give to others?
  - Are there no special obligations to help those during famine? Is any kind of charity equally good?

# Famine Relief: Prohibitions

- ▶ O'Neill thinks that not using people as means would go a long way during famines
  1. where there is a rationing scheme, one ought not to cheat
  2. transactions that are outwardly sales can be coercive when the consumer is desperate (E.g. selling water for high prices to those in dire need)
  3. duties towards dependents (as much as possible)

# Priority of Famine Relief

- ▶ Primary task of beneficence should be developing others' capacity to pursue their own ends – in particular, in parts of the world where extreme poverty and hunger leave people unable to pursue any of their other ends
- ▶ Why? Benevolence directed at putting people in a position to pursue whatever ends they may have has a stronger claim on us than beneficence directed at sharing ends with those who are already in a position to pursue varieties of ends
- ▶ it is more important to make people able to plan their own lives to a minimal extent
- ▶ Reason to help education [development of reason faculty]

# Objection

- How much?
- If a lot then it that seems to be too much
- If very little then it seems apathetic



- Kant: limited scope – does not specify whether every act you do is right/wrong

- Singer: unlimited scope – specified whether every action is right/wrong

- Kant: Nothing hangs on how much you have

Singer: You will have to give more if you have more (say 20% of income)

- Kant: have to give some of the time, but not generally required to give

Singer: comparison of alternative – always have an obligation to give to others (comparative moral importance)

- Singer: Pond – you should save the child

Kant: it looks like we do not have a obligation to save the child from drowning, though sometimes we do

# Moral Worth

- **First Proposition of Morality:** For an action to have genuine moral worth it must be done from duty
  - For Kant, a person of moral worth does the right thing, and does so in spite of the influence of desire and appetite which may lead her to do the wrong thing.
  - Moral worth is the most important attribute which a person can have.
  - Moral worth is more important talent, intelligent, courage, vor they may become bad and mischievous if the will which is to make use of them is not good.

# Objections

- **Objection:** is acting in for duty contrarry to human freedom – fulfilling desire to be moral
  - Isn't motive to be moral – to be a good person a selfish motive? There is an incentive, but Kant speaks of reverence for the moralitty = not selfish gain
- **Objection:** is morality subjective? If everyone picks a law to follows – does that mean moral laws are subjective – no . What guarantees that we have . Kant thinks there is only one law – the reason that we have same law is a practical reason that we share as human beings – we are all rational beings – and we all have to reason regardless of any contingent ends of any particular person – what is the content of such laws – see tests.

# Principles and Rationality

- What is the basis of the Categorical Imperative? Answer: rationality
- Different kinds of Principles: subjective, objective
- subjective (maxims): principle you act on, you set out for yourself
- objective (imperatives): principles which you ought to be following i.e. principles are the principles a rational person follow
  - Hypothetical (conditional): if you wanted x, you should do Y [means to an end
  - imperatives of skill (problematic / technical)
  - imperatives of prudence (assertorical)
  - Some ends we all want: e.g. happiness, health, etc
  - Examples:
    - if you want your car to run efficiently, always change your oil every 3000 miles
    - Categorical (unconditional): you should do Y, no matter what you want
- Morality is based on Categorical Reasoning Only

# Kantian Ethics

- Main idea 1: An action is morally permissible only if it would be permissible for others to do the same act
- Main idea 2: It is forbidden to ‘use’ people.
- Important property of CI
  - It universally applies to all rational people
  - Persons capable of free choice

# Supreme Principle of Morality: Categorical Imperative

- “so if the will is to be called absolutely good without qualification; what kind of law can this be? Since I have robbed the will of any impulses that could come to it from obeying any law, nothing remains to serve as a ·guiding· principle of the will except conduct’s universally conforming to law as such.”
- **That is, I ought never to act in such a way that I couldn’t also will that the maxim on which I act should be a universal law.**