

## Deontology and Famine

### I. Recap

*Consequentialism (Bentham, Mill, Singer)*

The rightness or wrongness of something depends entirely on the goodness or badness of its consequences.

**Act Utilitarianism:** You ought always to act so as to maximize utility [different theories emphasize happiness, pleasure, or welfare....], i.e., the right act is the act that results in the greatest amount of utility overall.

Singer relies on a consequentialist assumption to conclude that we ought to give large amounts to charity to relieve the suffering of distant others:

**Modified Prevent Suffering Principle:** If it is our power to prevent something very bad from happening, *without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant*, then we ought, morally, to do it.

Note that although Singer focuses on famine, the bad in question need not be hunger. It might be medical care, the ravages of war, injustice of other kinds.

For many, Singer's conclusions seem too demanding. Why shouldn't we each enjoy what we have? Are the distant needy really entitled to what Singer demands of us? Possible lines of criticism are many:

- *Partiality:* Far away people I don't even know have no moral claim on me. Distance/relationships matter. (See also pp. 43-46 in *FES*.)
  - Why does distance matter morally?
  - But what about the homeless in Central Square?
- *Individual Responsibility:* It isn't *my* fault that some people are suffering. Why should I have to sacrifice for them? In fact, empirical research suggests that people are making their own choices to buy TVs instead of food. If they are hungry, it is their own fault. (See Duflo et al.)
  - Is moral responsibility a causal notion, i.e. I am responsible for what I cause? Or is it broader?
    - Is there a forward-looking notion of responsibility: I am responsible for making the world better than it is now? We all must do our part.
    - Is there a collective notion of responsibility: I alone didn't cause suffering, but I am part of a system that did? (See also pp. 46-47 in *FES*.)
  - Are individuals always sufficiently educated to make good food/health choices?
  - What is the standard of living that we are entitled to? Is it only bare existence?
- *Charity skepticism:* It is unlikely that anything I give will make a difference. In fact, charity might make things worse. (See pp. 57-59 in *FES*.)
  - Is this true of *all* giving? Is there no useful intervention, ever?
- *Lifeboat:* There are too many people on the planet anyway. It is inevitable that some will die, and we must allow this so that the rest (and the planet?) can survive. (See pp. 47-52 in *FES*.)
  - See questions about this approach on the previous (2/15) handout.

### II. Deontology

Let's think more about individual responsibility. According to deontology there are some basic or non-derivative moral considerations *beyond or in addition to* good effects, and these give rise to our moral obligations, i.e., what we *ought* to do. The most important alternative to consequentialism, historically speaking, derives from the work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), and so predictably is called a **Kantian** approach. The utilitarian takes happiness or pleasure to be intrinsically good and seeks to maximize it; Kantians, however, take *the good will*, i.e., our ability to conform our will to reason, to be intrinsically good. The right way to honor what's good about a good will is not to maximize, however, but to *respect* such wills.

#### A. Kantian Deontology: Categorical Imperative

At the core of Kant's ethics is a principle known as the *Categorical Imperative* (CI) which Kant states in different ways. (See Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* in recommended reading.)

CI - Universal Law formulation: *Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.* (11)

CI - Principle of Humanity formulation: So act that you use humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only. (29)

In more contemporary terms:

You are No Exception Principle (YANE): "...in whatever you do, you should act for reasons that could serve as acceptable reasons for everyone." (Sayre-McCord, 5)

and

Respect for Persons Principle (RPP): In all action one should respect others as sources of value and never merely as an instrument for one's own purposes. (Sayre-McCord, 7)

## B. You Are No Exception Principle

We generally think it is wrong to do something that we know would be problematic if everyone else did it too, e.g., cheating on an exam, removing a pollution control device from a car, stealing a book from the bookstore. In each of these cases the agent's goals could not be achieved if everyone else did the same thing, so the success of the action depends on making a distinction between what the agent does and what others do. But making oneself an exception this way seems wrong. Kant thought that in cases like this there was a sort of irrationality.

The idea is that in any intentional action, I am implicitly or explicitly acting on a principle of some kind. The principle is given by your *reason for acting*, not necessarily your  *motive*. Consider three shopkeepers, both of whom are committed to giving correct change to their customers. They act, however, on different principles, or what Kant called "maxims":

- Mr. Practical:* When (and only when?) I can gain a good business reputation by giving correct change, I shall give correct change.
- Ms. Sympathetic:* When I feel it appropriate to give correct change—which I always do because I'm a sympathetic person—I shall give correct change.
- Mr. Righteous:* When I can perform a morally right act by giving correct change, I shall give correct change.

In each case there is a generalized form of the maxim of the form:

*General Form:* Whenever one is \_\_\_\_\_, he/she shall \_\_\_\_\_.

On Kant's view, what matters in evaluating an action is the principle that is employed in intending or willing. Two individuals can do the same thing, but one of them do wrong and the other right, depending on what they will. Some maxims fail the test, so the corresponding action is immoral, e.g., (in generalized form):

Whenever one has an exam and doesn't feel like studying, she shall copy off of her neighbor's work.

Presumably we could not all act on this maxim, for if we are all planning to copy off each other, there will be no work to copy! The underlying rationale for an approach such as this is to show that the source of morality is in *reason* or *rationality*; those who are immoral are in some important sense acting *irrationally*.

## C. Respect for Persons Principle

Although there seems to be *something* right about the (YANE) version of the CI, it isn't clear that it captures what makes an action right or wrong. So let's turn to the "Respect for Persons Principle" (RPP): In all action one should respect others as sources of value and never merely as an instrument for one's own purposes. (Sayre-McCord, 7)

This principle allows that we can use others as a means to accomplish our own ends; after all, we rely crucially on others all the time. Your professors serve as a means to your ends of gaining knowledge. But these are cases in which there is consent—your professors aren't deceived or coerced into serving your needs. According to the (RPP), cheating on your final would be wrong because you would be using me (or your TA) as a mere means to a good grade: this would be a scheme that we would not—or better: could not reasonably—consent

to. Why not? Because we are choosing a life based on the value of imparting knowledge. Our choice to do this is something of value, and deserving of respect.

**Worth noting:** on the Kantian view (in contrast to utilitarianism):

- The focus of moral evaluation is the maxim or principle implicit in the act, not the results. A good action might have bad results and vv.
- The theory works well when information is scarce. Utilitarian calculations require a lot of data in order to make plausible predictions about consequences. But because it is usually clear when an action would use another as a mere means (in contrast to what would promote human happiness overall), a Kantian view doesn't require that we have as much knowledge in order to determine what is right or wrong.

#### **D. Kantian Duties towards Others**

On this view the Kantian picture has a strong negative component comprising the *duty of justice*:

Don't treat others as a *mere* means.

You can't abuse and exploit people, or treat them as merely things in your way, things to be "dealt with," or *things* in any sense. And a positive component comprising the *duty of beneficence*:

As far as possible treat others as ends in themselves, i.e., as a rational person with his or her own aims, objectives, goals, conceptions of the good, etc.

So granted, we must never exploit, deceive, or coerce others; but it is a more difficult and complicated matter to figure out how to help others achieve their own ends. People are complicated: we each want and aim for many things and sometimes our goals are even incompatible. Moreover, in treating people as ends, we must be sensitive to human limitation, both cognitive limitations and limitations on our autonomy. Onora O'Neill suggests:

To treat one another as ends in themselves such beings have to base their action on principles that do not undermine but rather sustain and extend one another's capacities for autonomous action... Since finite rational beings cannot generally achieve their aims without some help and support from others, a general refusal of help and support amounts to failure to treat others as rational and autonomous beings, that is as ends in themselves. (O'Neill in DMI (recommended readings) 469)

In traditional terms, duties of justice are *perfect duties*, i.e., they are absolute requirements, the violation of which is immoral. Duties of beneficence are *imperfect duties*, i.e., they are duties to act in ways that further certain ends or goals, but there are legitimate choices about how to do this. Another way to think of it is that corresponding to duties of justice are rights: I have a right to bodily integrity and you have a perfect duty to respect my bodily integrity. People have many needs, however, and although you may have a duty to help those in need, it may be morally permissible to meet someone else's needs rather than mine. But it would be morally wrong of you to ignore everyone's needs but your own.

### **III. Rights**

Do individuals, however, have a *moral right* to adequate nutrition? (Or, in Sen's words, food entitlements? We'll talk more about Sen et al tomorrow.) What if we are starving and no one steps up to help? Does *no one* have a duty to help *me?!* (See especially pp. 54-57 in *FES*.)

Rights are standardly divided into *negative rights* and *positive rights*. It is possible to map some of the discussion of these onto the Kantian picture. Negative rights correspond to perfect duties: we are all, always, morally required to treat others with respect for their integrity and not interfere with them. Positive rights, however, e.g. the right to food, healthcare, etc. seem to require that we take action not only to respect and protect the right in question, but also to fulfill it. If I have a positive right to adequate nutrition, then someone must fulfill it if I lack food. According to those who hold that we only have imperfect duties to provide for others, i.e., that providing food to others is only a duty of beneficence, there is no positive right to adequate nutrition; at best others have an imperfect duty to do what they can.

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24.03 Good Food: The Ethics and Politics of Food Choices  
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