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24.02 Moral Problems and the Good Life
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A Kantian Approach to Famine Relief

I. Recap

In considering systematic approaches to ethics, we considered Utilitarianism/Consequentialism, Deontology (Kant) and Virtue Ethics (Aristotle). In considering the problem of global justice and, more specifically, famine, Singer relies on a broadly consequentialist approach. Many find his conclusions overly demanding; some have suggested that utilitarianism (and views like it) go too far in valuing impartiality. Do the other approaches to ethics give us further insight into our obligations to the distant needy?

II. The Categorical Imperative

Let's recall the principles of Kantian Ethics. Remember, the fundamental moral principle for Kant is the *categorical imperative*. He articulates it in several ways. We considered the *Principle of Universal Law*:

Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become universal law.

Which we restated as:

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

And the *Principle of Humanity*:

So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.

Or:

Respect for Persons Principle: 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)

III. Respect for Persons

Onora O'Neill interprets the *Principle of Humanity* this way (see *DMI*, p. 468):

CI₂: Right actions are those that are guided by intentions to treat persons as far as possible as ends in themselves, and never as a mere means, i.e., one must not undertake to involve others in a scheme of action to which they could not in principle (rationally?) consent.

This allows that we can use others as a means to accomplish our own ends; after all, we rely crucially on others all the time. However, according to CI₂, cheating on your final would be wrong because you would be using me (or your TA) as a mere means to a good grade: you would be involving us in a scheme whereby you would get a good grade, but it would be a scheme that we would not—or better: could not reasonably—consent to. On this view the Kantian picture has a strong negative component comprising the *duty of justice*:

Don't treat others as a mere means.

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. (*DMI* p. 469)

So, 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. So beneficence

must be selective (DMI 469). Moreover, in treating people as ends, we must be sensitive to human limitation, both cognitive limitations and limitations on our autonomy. 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. (DMI 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.

What is our duty to those who suffer? How should we respond to famine, etc? One way to spell out the details would be as follows (see the O'Neill essay):

For those who are present during/at the famine:

- No cheating in a rationing scheme;
- One must fulfill one's duties towards particular others (e.g., dependents).

For those afar:

- No exploiting, deceiving, or coercing those in dire circumstances;
- Avoid participation in institutions that exploit, deceive, or coerce others. (This may be difficult to confirm.)
- Duties of beneficence are strong in times of famine and extreme suffering because there are significant opportunities to make the pursuit of *any* ends possible for those who are severely disadvantaged. But one must be selective, and may choose to benefit others closer to home.

Questions

1. Is CI₂'s construal of what it is to treat someone as a "mere means" adequate? Aren't there cases in which someone could or would consent, but it still involves exploitation? Can people consent to being exploited? Can people consent to being treated as a mere means? If so, in these cases, is it wrong to use them as a mere means? What might Kant say?

2. Consider again the Kantian principle: **Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.** Is it correct to assume that the duty of beneficence must inevitably be selective, and that we cannot treat *everyone* as an end. If we opted for Singer's program of giving, would that better achieve treating humanity "always as an end"? What premise in Singer's argument does a Kantian reject?

3. Are there considerations that stem from the first formulation of the CI that have consequences for famine relief? Consider again: **Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.** Is there some inconsistency in willing: When I can enjoy myself through excessive and luxurious consumption, I shall excessively consume (even when many are dying of starvation). Some have suggested that an "inconsistency" may result, on Kant's view, when it is a matter of fact that one's maxim cannot be generalized. Because of scarcity and inequitable distribution of resources, as a matter of fact, not everyone could excessively consume. Does this suggest the maxim is not morally acceptable? If not, is there a related maxim that whose generalization is inconsistent (can you formulate one)? Could a Kantian support the idea that a more equitable distribution of resources is a duty of justice?