A Kantian Duty of Beneficence

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Nonbeneficence and the Categorical Imperative

Do we have a duty to help those who are in need? According to
Kant, what we ought to do is given by *the categorical imperative*,

> **First Formulation of the Categorical Imperative:**
> *Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that
> it should become a universal law.* [Kant, *G* 421]

Suppose that you are doing very well, you recognize that others are
suffering great hardships and that you could easily help them. Are
you obligated to help?

The Categorical Imperative Test: nonbeneficence

(1) *Formulate the Maxim:* "I will not help others."

(2) *Universalize the Maxim into a Law of Nature:* "No one
ever helps anyone else."

(3) *Imagine Trying to Will Your Maxim in Such a World.*
What would the world be like if *no one ever helped anyone
else*?

(4) *Contradiction Step.* Is there a contradiction that follows
when you imagine trying to will your maxim in a world
in which your maxim is a universally followed Law of
Nature?

Note: For Kant, there are two types of
contradictions.

1. *Contradiction in Conception:* Your
   maxim cannot be thought of as
   universal Law of Nature. (This gives
   rise to a Perfect Duty).

2. *Contradiction in the Will:* Your maxim
   can be thought, but it cannot be
   willed as a Law of Nature. (This
   gives rise to an Imperfect Duty).

In this case, Kant thinks that a maxim
of nonbeneficence leads to a Contradiction in the Will.

According to Kant, it is not possible "to *will* that such a principle
should hold everywhere as a law of nature" because

> a will which decided in this way would be in conflict with itself, since
> many a situation might arise in which the man needed love and sym-
> pathy from others, and in which, by such a law of nature sprung from
> his own will, he would rob himself of all hope of the help he wants for
> himself. [Kant, *G* 423]

The contradiction is this. **(1) You will a world in which no one ever
could help anyone else.** But **(2) you have various goals, which
might require the help of others to achieve.** So, by willing such a
world, you make it so that you are the cause of your being unable to
get the help that you want in order to pursue your ends.

The Puzzle and Herman's Solution

Problem 0: merely prudential argument.   When you endorse two different policies that conflict, there are two different ways to resolve it:

1. You can give up your general policy of never providing help; or
2. You can adopt the policy of giving up those future ends that require help from others.

If you think it's unlikely you'll require help, then where's the contradiction?

> **Response:** The contradiction in the will is not in virtue of *prudential* considerations. If (A) there are ends that you want more than you could hope to benefit from nonbeneficence, or (B) there are ends that it is not possible for any rational agent to forgo, then there is a Contradiction in the Willing of a maxim of nonbeneficence.

Sidgwick's Argument: "Even granting that everyone, in the actual moment of distress, must necessarily wish for the assistance of others: still a strong man, after balancing the chances of life, may easily think that he and such as he have more to gain, on the whole, by the general adoption of the egoistic maxim; benevolence being likely to bring more trouble than profit."

Herman's Argument

P1 When we will an End, we commit to willing the necessary Means to that End or abandoning that End.

P2 If you will the MAXIM OF NONBENEFICENCE as a universal law of nature, then you commit to abandoning any of your Ends under circumstances when the help of others is a necessary Means to it.

P3 You can commit to this only if, for any End, it could be rational to abandon that End.

P4 There are some Ends ("true needs") that it wouldn't be rational to abandon under any circumstances.

C It's not rational to will the MAXIM OF NONBENEFICENCE as a universal law of nature.

Problem 1: the stoic.   Why can't the strong man commit to abandoning any end he discovers he cannot pursue without help? Doing so requires a lot of self-discipline. And, "there is room for temptation where there is need for discipline and strength," and "whether the conditions of life he encounters are gentle or overwhelm his strength of will is not itself something he can control."

Upshot: Even the goal of being self-sufficient (i.e., the goal of never needing help from others) requires help from others sometimes.

Problem 2: the wanton.   What about someone who does not care whether or not his particular goals are achieved? If there are ends

that one cannot forgo and these ends might require the help of others to achieve, then the Wanton, too, will not be able to rationally will a maxim of nonbeneficence. Are there such ends?

> **True Needs:** "The ends which must be realized if a person is to function (or continue to function) as a rational, end-setting agent ... They are the conditions of our 'power to set an end' that is the 'characteristic of humanity'. (DV 51)"

What are some examples? What makes something a True Need?

Upshot: Willing a world of nonbeneficence conflicts with the *practical consequences* of the conditions of human rationality.

Some Problems

1. *Duty of Self-Sacrifice?* If Herman's argument works, would this also show that we have a duty to sacrifice ourselves to help others? If so, we have an implausibly strong duty of beneficence.

   > **Response:** "[T]he first case it is the willing of a law of universal nonbeneficence that deprives one of what one needs. In the case of nonsacrificial beneficence, it is not what is willed but the contingent unavailability of resources that raises the issue of sacrifice." [Herman 588]

Plug the maxim "I will help others but not when that requires great sacrifice" into Kant's Categorical Imperative Test and check.

2. *Angel Objection.* Suppose that there are some rational beings — Angels — that are not vulnerable and dependent on others. Couldn't agents rationally will a maxim of nonbeneficence without contradiction?

   > **Response:** Yes. Angels might not have a duty to help others. "But for angels, it is not a contingent fact about them (there is no appeal to strength, wealth, etc.) that leads them not to need help." [Herman 591] The fact that *we* are required to help one another turns on the fact that we are dependent beings.

3. *The Duty is not Action-Guiding.* We have the duty "To help sometimes." But when? Under what circumstances? When is it okay to not help? What if I've already helped someone today?

   > **Response:** "The needs for which a person may make a claim under the duty of mutual aid are those which cannot be left unmet if he is to continue in his activity as a rational agent. Thus *we may refrain from helping only if such action would place our own rational activity in jeopardy.*" [Herman 598]