

Kant and Respect for Autonomy

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As we have seen, a central theme in the Four Principles approach is respect for patient autonomy. Beauchamp and Childress, of course, tried to put this forward as a general moral principle with which we all readily agree without bringing in a lot of subterranean philosophical architecture.

Unfortunately, dispensing with the philosophical architecture altogether brings its own difficulties, as I suspect we are beginning to notice. Recall how Beauchamp and Childress have some difficulty explaining what to do when any of the four principles directly conflict with each other: For example, should autonomy take place over beneficence? Should justice overrule individual autonomy? Without some deeper, more fundamental understanding of ethics, how are we to resolve such conflicts?

What should we say to health professionals who might prefer to emphasize beneficence over respect for autonomy?

Also, what should we say about other cultures that perhaps place much less importance upon individual autonomy?

If we worry about such matters, then we will be naturally motivated to pursue moral philosophy a bit deeper and a bit farther than Beauchamp and Childress think is generally necessary. And a good starting place is the Kantian moral philosophy.

Kant is without doubt one of the most important, most widely read, and most relevant of modern moral philosophers. Central to Kant's moral theory is his conception that what matters morally speaking is our motive (our "maxim"). Motives, in the Kantian moral sense, are rationally, freely chosen reasons for action. Moral, thus, is not in the outcome of action; it is in the intent.

It is rational will, therefore, that earns individuals their place, their membership, in the kingdom of moral agents.

And therefore, not surprisingly, it is that nature and fact of our being free rational wills that characterizes the fundamental nature of morality. The heart of morality, thus, is to always act as a free, rational agent. (That is, to truly be what we most ultimately really are: rational will.)

Since what makes each of us a moral agent is our nature as a rational will, we are in that particular regard thus all alike. What is true for one of us—as a rational will—must likewise be true for each and every one of us.

This is how Kant derives the first practical formulation of the moral law: the Categorical Imperative. *Act only upon that maxim that you can will at the same that everyone act upon.* In other words, if you are going to allow yourself to act out of a particular intent (maxim) then you must be willing that everyone do so as well. If you can not rationally, without contradiction, so will, then you should not allow yourself to act upon that maxim.

Kant's second practical formulation of the moral law is the Kingdom of Ends: never treatment another moral agent only as a means-to-an-end: but always treat other agents as ends-in-themselves. In other words, moral agents (persons) are by their nature self-governing. We decide for ourselves what we will (or will not) pursue, what we will seek to avoid, what we will admire, etc. For someone to forcibly impose these kinds of important choices upon us would be not to respect our autonomy. We wish for others to respect us as the rational decision makers, self-determining agents that we *really* are: likewise, we must respect the capacity for self-determination in others.

Kant's moral insights are certainly an important influence behind our modern commitment to political liberalism (the idea that individuals should be able to make their own individual choices about important life matters, even if their choices differ markedly from what we ourselves might choose in the same circumstances). And yet, there can be no doubt that the way Beauchamp and Childress (and nearly every other contemporary bioethicist) use the term "autonomy" is a much thinner, less rich, less complex than Kant uses the term. Modern medical ethics has, in a way, "dumbed-down" Kant's principle of respect for autonomy.

Understanding Kant includes understanding that there are appropriate constraints upon free choice: For Kant we are morally required to choose only maxims that can be universalized (via the Categorical Imperative). (Perhaps more accurately, we must not act upon any maxim that we cannot universalize without rational contradiction. Some moral philosophers have tried to use the Categorical Imperative to dot out between the forbidden, the permissible-but-not-required, and the obligatory. The forbidden is for what cannot be universalized without contradiction. The obligatory is what the negative [i.e., not doing the action] can not be universalized without contradiction. And the permissible is what might pass both tests [i.e., you could pursue it without contradiction but could also not do it without contradiction])

What especially distinguished Kant from Beauchamp and Childress (to use them simply as one example) is that Kant present a very clear philosophical conception of what it means to be a person, and this conception drives the moral philosophy as a whole. It provides a philosophical foundation.

But Kant leaves us room to morally condemn (and if appropriate, punish) agents who choose to act immorally. It is quite unclear if Beauchamp and Childress can make much sense of a particular agent making an autonomous but immoral choice. What would the criteria be? And what would be an appropriate response on our part?

Kant, then, offers an amazing view at what a moral philosopher can do: provide a vision of morality where all the pieces fall into place together like an elegant, intricate puzzle. It is also a very compelling view, and one that appeals deeply to our American sense of the importance of individual self-determination.