

Introduction to Philosophy

The Nature of Morality: An Application of Kantian Moral Theory

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Reading

- Onora O'Neill, "Kantian Approaches to Some Famine Problems".

Background

Onora O'Neill is a prominent political philosopher who believes that Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy offers a better understanding of morality than utilitarianism, though she does not accept all of Kant's claims. In this article, she presents a simplified account of Kantian moral theory by focusing solely on "the Formula of the End in Itself" version of the categorical imperative. She then explains how Kantian moral theory applies to the issue of global poverty and famine.

Questions

1. How does Onora O'Neill explain a maxim? How does it relate to an intention? How do we determine which maxim describes a particular choice in order to assess it with the categorical imperative?
2. O'Neill makes a distinction between "using persons as a mere means" and "treating persons as ends in themselves". What is this distinction? How does this lead to a further distinction between "Kantian duties of justice" and "Kantian duties of beneficence"? According to O'Neill, what sorts of duties do these imply in times of famine?
3. Throughout her article, O'Neill presents a lot of differences between Kantian moral theory and utilitarianism. What are these? Are any of these persuasive in favoring one theory over the other?