



## **Philosophy: Morality and Justice - Audio**

*Kant's moral philosophy*

### **Winifred**

In this recording Alex Barber the author of Book Three, discusses Kant's moral philosophy with Onora O'Neill Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge. Professor O'Neill is also known as Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve after she joined the House of Lords as a cross party member in 1999.

### **Alex Barber**

Onora, I would like to start by asking you briefly about your work in Parliament. How far do your Kantian sympathies shape how you approach this work? Have you ever found yourself needing to persuade Utilitarians for example of where they've gone wrong?

### **Professor O'Neill**

An awful lot of things that go into producing good legislation and I think people's moral position is one of them. That said I find very few people are straightforwardly Utilitarians and think that everything should be subject to a calculation of the expected benefit. That's probably largely because those calculations aren't very feasible. So you've got in any Parliament a range of people with hugely varied moral positions. No doubt some Utilitarians, some Kantians, many people of religious faith, many people with complex combinations of positions. But I should emphasise that Utilitarians have no monopoly on taking means ends reasoning and prudential reasoning seriously. They do of course emphasise it very strongly. But everybody I've ever met who is interested in good legislation also has to take it seriously. It's not as though Kant for example for Indifference to serious means ends reasoning.

### **Alex Barber**

Let's talk about Kant's moral philosophy rather than it's application in Parliament. One of the best known elements of Kant's moral philosophy is his demand that we act only on maxims that are universalisable or in his words "I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law." Can you unpack that? What does it amount to in practice?

### **Professor O'Neill**

I think it amounts to the thought don't make an exception of your own case. If you act on some principle that could work for you but actually couldn't work for other people then

probably you are making an exception of your own case. For example if I say well I would very much like other people to accept my instructions. I would like to be a slave master for example. Then I do have to think about the following: if I were a slave master then that doesn't work unless some other people are slaves. If those other people are slaves then it's not open to them to act on the principle of being a slave master. Now that's an absurd case isn't it but it does suggest that principles of coercing and deceiving other people, principles that damage or destroy other people's capacities for action are not universalisable principles, but principles that make an exception of ones own case.

### **Alex Barber**

Kant starts his discussion by setting out to find something that is unconditionally good. And he reaches the conclusion that the only thing that is unconditionally good is a good will. Can you explain what he means by a good will and why he thinks that is the only thing that is unconditionally good?

### **Professor O'Neill**

Let me start with the second point. If we tell ourselves that some ordinary thing in the world, Kant gives the examples of riches or talents is good, we realise that it can be good for certain purposes but not others. Or take health which we all think is a great good and it is a great good but we can also understand the thought oh that Hitler been less healthy wouldn't that have been a better world? It surely would. All these ordinary good things in the world are good in many circumstances or even perhaps in a few circumstances but they aren't unconditionally good. Now the idea of something being unconditionally good is that you don't have to make additional assumptions to understand why it is good. And there is a simple thought experiment. Try this. If you ask yourself would it be ever a better situation for someone to have ill will towards others than for them to have good will. I think you can see that even when somebody acts harmfully or stupidly it's better for them to have a good than an ill will. That said of course we don't know what a good will is just like that. And Kant's main aim in the beginning of the Groundwork is to try to explicate what it would be to have a good will. What sort of principles would such a will have to adopt? And he suggests that they couldn't be conditional principles. They couldn't be principles in which we simply assert that something is good. They have to be principles that could be principles in any circumstances.

### **Alex Barber**

Why is that?

### **Professor O'Neill**

Well if it's conditional then you get the problem of the exceptions don't you that if you say well, a principle is good provided it meets the condition of maximising wealth or it meets the condition of helping the people I like. Those would be too simple examples of conditional

principles. Then we have to ask ourselves what would a world be like in which a principle of wealth maximisation were taken as fundamental to life. And the answer is that would be a pretty brutal world of competition and damage and harm to many people. Or ask yourself what it would be like if it was not a principle of wealth maximisation but a principle of achieving what people want. Immediately you have to ask well don't some people want awful things? They want harm for other people. They want disproportionate resources for themselves. The satisfaction of preferences is not going to produce an unconditionally good world. It might be a world that is good enough for some people but disastrous for others.

**Alex Barber**

We've been talking about the importance for Kant of unconditional goodness. What's the link between this and the universalisability requirement that we talked about earlier?

**Professor O'Neill**

It's extremely close because a universalisable principle is a principle that could be a principle for anybody so it doesn't invoke some particular aspect or feature of some people that other people lack. It doesn't for example say this is a principle only for men or only for women or only for people living in rich countries or only for people living in poor countries. The principles that Kant thinks will be unconditional are those that don't refer to a condition that is met by some human beings but not by other human beings

**Alex Barber**

Kant later reformulates the universalisability requirement as the demand that we treat humanity never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end. But what does this amount to in practice? Is he saying that we should never take a bus or take a taxi because to do so would be to treat the driver merely as a means to the end of getting somewhere?

**Professor O'Neill**

I would say that this is the most culturally vibrant of Kant's formulations of this one idea of not making an exception of ones self. When he talks about how we treat others he is looking at the whole matter from the perspective of the person on the receiving end. So like many of us he thinks that we shouldn't treat people as mere means as tools. And of course taking a taxi or bus is not treating the driver as a mere means because the driver has freely chosen to take a job in which he is the driver of a bus and opens the door at the bus stop and so on. Now the more difficult bit to understand is what is it to treat other people as ends in themselves. How can there be something that is more than not treating them as mere means? I avoid treating someone as a mere means providing I don't treat them as a thing. I don't coerce them. I don't deceive them. But what more do I have to do to treat them as ends. And Kant's ideas I have to regard them as being like me a person who aims to do things in the world, who seeks to

achieve things. And he cashes it out by saying what we have to do to treat others as ends in themselves is to support them in their pursuit of legitimate, permissible objectives. It doesn't mean that you have to join in if your best friend has some unfortunate plan for example to steal a large fortune. But it does mean that we support one another in the pursuit of our legitimate ends.

**Alex Barber**

What does he mean by humanity in that formulation?

**Professor O'Neill**

Kant thought of human beings and potentially other beings as rational beings. Of course we are not merely rational beings. We are embodied beings. But we are rational although we are finite and limited in our rationality as in all other respects. So that in talking about humanity he is talking about a wide range of human beings and he did not as would have been common among other people writing in the Eighteenth Century think only of human beings in a typical European Christian society. He includes all of humanity. He wrote to some extent about for example duties to animals but this wasn't a central theme.

**Alex Barber**

Kant sometimes seems to be concerned only with rational agents. He seems to be concerned with what they should do and why they are owed respect. But so many of our moral quandaries are about being who aren't rational. I'm thinking for example about animals or young children or people with very severe mental disabilities. Does Kant just ignore them plight?

**Professor O'Neill**

No. I think what one has to see is that Kant is trying to work out the shape of a theory of duties or obligations, not a theory of rights primarily although some of those duties may have corresponding rights. This sort of theory has to address itself to those beings that are capable of acting on the theory or acting on principles. Hence the fact that it is directed to rational beings by which he doesn't mean purely rational beings but beings with some capacity for rationality. But he took for granted that on the receiving end of action there will be many other sorts of being including of course children, people who are ill, including indeed non human animals. I suspect that it is simply a sort of accidental reflection of contemporary preoccupation with the recipient perspective that has led people to think that there must be some deficiency in Kant's emphasis on agency. He emphasises agency because he is talking about what has to be done not about what has to be received. The first question of Kant's ethics is after all what ought I do. It isn't the contemporary question what ought I get.

**Alex Barber**

Kant is generally regarded as among the more difficult philosophers to read even if his work is full of important insights. Do you have any advice for a student who is put off reading Kant because of the difficulty of doing so?

**Professor O'Neill**

I think this is an experience everybody who has read Kant has had. He's tougher to read than some other philosophers. There is no doubt about that. One of the things that I think is quite a nice way is to pick up some of his shorter, later essays. One shouldn't bark one's shins straight away on the Critique of Pure Reason, which is his masterpiece, fascinating as it is. But the shorter essays things like What is Enlightenment these could be fascinating. But the other thing is respect the history. Don't assume that Kant is trying to answer the same questions that someone else is trying to answer. That's generally a very good idea in reading a difficult text. Go along with it for what he's trying to answer and see if you can make sense of it. If you can't make sense of it drop it and come back later. Never persist with a text that is merely grazing your shins.

**Alex Barber**

Onora O'Neill, thank you very much.