

Sophie's Choice

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Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to establish that a parents duty is to protect his children using Kant's deontology. However there are issues which are raised regarding the levels of duty which cannot be resolved using Kant's theory alone. Kant fails to compare one duty from another which makes it inconclusive about which duty should one act on at times of conflict.

Sophie is given two choices by the doctor. Either she can save one of her child, or neither of them. If she chooses to save one of her child, she is faced with another dilemma of which child to save. In the following essay I will try to establish that her duty as a parent is to 'protect her children' using Kant's deontology. However, Kant's theory fails to resolve the second dilemma of choosing which child to save.

Kant's deontology is based on a priori principles of morality which are universal. If the principles needs to be universal, they need to be a priori else the principles will vary across people and we will fail to establish universal moral standards. Kant said, "an action should be done from a sense duty if it has to have a moral worth" (Louis Pojman , "The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature" 302). This duty is a priori and is not determined by experience. For Kant the morality of action does not depend on the effect of our action since we cannot know the outcome of an action prior to performing it. We can however control the "will" behind the action. A purely moral will is the one which is determined by purely rational principles. This is what Kant calls a "good will". If the will is determined by personal inclinations, then we will fail to establish universal moral principles.

To check if our maxims are in accord with the supreme moral principles, Kant has offered some formulations of the Categorical Imperatives. Using these formulations, we can test if the maxim that "a parent should protect his children" can be qualified to be a moral principle.

First, since the the moral law is universal, it should be applicable to everyone. Hence, there shouldn't any problem if everyone act on it. If everyone follows our maxim that 'parent should protect their children', then there will be less child mortality and healthier population.

Second, human and all rational beings exist as end in themselves. Man necessarily conceives himself as being an end in himself. And every other rational being regard his existence similarly. Hence, a supreme practical law must be one which can be deduced by respecting the intrinsic worth of all rational beings. A moral law should be one which treats all humanity in every case as an end in itself, not merely as a means. A child possess rational capacity. When a parent protects his child, he is saving the intrinsic rational capacity of the child. Hence, treating the child as an end in himself, not merely as a means.

So far we have reached the conclusion that a parents duty is to protect and care for his child. Which implies Sophie's duty is to protect her children. When Sophie is given a choice of saving one child instead or neither of them, she should chose the former option as her duty requires.

However, there raises another dilemma of which child to save since her duty is to both the children. In other words, there is a conflict of which duty is to be performed.

We know that duty needs to be performed without inclinations. But Kant's theory does not provide sufficient tools to decide which duty is to be acted upon at times when an agent is given choice of acting on multiple choices. For example when a doctor in a hospital confronts a situation where he has two patients under his care. One of the patient is suffering from mild fever and the other is severely injured and is likely to die if not operated immediately. The doctor will perform his duty if he operates on any one of the patients. Hence we also need justification of which moral act is to be acted upon at times of conflict which Kant fails to give.

Another issue which is raised by the previous example is the subjectivity of the duty. For example Kant argued that a man's duty is to speak truth (p. 303). While this maxim is to be taken universal, the notion of "truth" is in fact subjective. There can be instance where a person believes something to be true when in fact it is false in reality. For example, a parent can teach his child that a particular superstition is true when in fact it is false. In this case, even though this maxim is found to be a moral duty by the categorical imperative, it can lead to problems if everyone uses this maxim in the same way as the parent.

Bibliography

Louis Pojman, 2004, *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature*,
Oxford: Oxford University Press.