

Kantian Ethics Applied to Human Trafficking

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Kant was a philosopher who approached ethics in a memorable way. Not only did he ditch the idea that happiness is the end to strive for. He also argued that each person is a moral agent with equal human dignity and moral duty. He believed that morality is about having good will, i.e. having good behavior. In having good will, each person follows through with their moral duties whether it ends in happiness or not. However, he was careful in labeling an action as a moral duty. He did not want to rely on the importance that an action may hold in a hypothetical situation. Moral duties stem from what Kant calls moral law, also known as categorical imperative. Categorical imperative involves what Kant called maxims, i.e. moral judgments in which people live. For a maxim to be considered a moral law, it has to be universally applied through reason. Human trafficking is an issue that is currently being challenged in our country. It involves coercively forcing people into situations they would never consider otherwise. Human trafficking is a complex matter because coercion is, firstly not federally illegal, but also ethically controversial. It suggests that society shares the moral responsibility for the crimes convicted. Some argue that this responsibility is misplaced. This essay will assess the adequacy of Kantian ethics by applying its principles of human dignity, universalizability, and moral duties to the complexities of human trafficking.

To Kant, human dignity means that people are not used as merely means but as ends. He says that humans are intrinsically valuable because of our ability to reason and rationalize. In order to respect such values, he suggests that everyone be treated with equal dignity and with equal responsibility. If everyone has the same capability to reason, then everyone should be treated as such. This equal human dignity and respect is what allows for categorical imperatives to exist. When considering if a maxim is universal, we must assume that all humans have equal

dignity. It also implies equal moral duty. If we are all equally bound by the maxim, then we are all responsible for acting on it to produce good will.

Universalizability is discovered through a step-by-step process. According to Kant, in order to determine if a maxim is a moral law that all people should follow, one must rationally consider four steps. First, identify the will, circumstance(s), and reasoning of the maxim. Second, assume that this maxim now applies to everyone. Third, imagine a world where everyone is doing the exact same thing, in the exact same circumstance(s), and for the exact same reason(s). Fourth, rationally ask, is this world possible? If yes, then this maxim can be considered a categorical imperative and should be acted on. If not, then acting on this maxim would be immoral.

As mentioned above, moral duty is explained as a command that is to be acted on by all people. Any maxim acted on should be done so because of a moral duty to do it. The third part of the maxim, the reasoning, must match the categorical imperative. If it does not, the action is not considered a moral action. It was done to gain something from it. In that case, it changes the maxim entirely. We would have to reimagine and re-ask ourselves if such a world where the action is possible with the new set of circumstances and/or reasons. If everyone hands out flowers out of love, we may forgive the death of the plant. However, if everyone hands out flowers out of self-pleasure, we may resent people for killing the plants. In this example, and in Kant's theory, the reason is just as important to the maxim as the will itself. To simplify this, Kant says that a will that comes from a moral duty will always be good.

The principle of human dignity aligns with the thought that human trafficking is an issue that all of society should be concerned about. When a victim is being trafficked, they are being used as a means to acquire money or pleasure. The abuser is not treating the victim as a human

with equal dignity. If society assumes that the victim is a person with the capability for reason, then they should also have equal levels of respect. If a victim is someone's family member, that someone would surely try their best to help the victim. That same someone cannot then declare that any other victim does not need help without contradiction. In this example, the person is following the maxim to help the victim in need. Through respect for other's equal human dignity, we can assume that others are also capable of helping those in need.

To determine the universalizability of human trafficking, we can consider the maxim that abusers take, the maxim that victims take, the maxim of those who fight against it, and the maxim of those who refuse to take responsibility for it. The maxim of an abuser would go something like, "I coerce people to do what I want by promising them happiness and/or basic needs when I have the capability to do so because I want to make a profit." After imagining a world where this is a universalized maxim, a rational person would likely agree that it is impossible. Coercion would be a common occurrence because the capability to do so is rather common to encounter, and wanting a profit is certainly common. In a world where those two facts allow coercion, it is fair to say that coercion would be used. If people were to so recklessly use coercion, no one would have trust. People would not help others out of fear for their freedom, or they may become so used to the occurrence that they become immune to coercion. It would become impossible to coerce others. Meaning, no one would be able to follow through with the maxim. A world where this maxim is universal would contradict itself.

A victim's maxim would go something like, "I do as I'm told even if it means going against my morals when I am coerced to do so because I need to meet my basic needs." A contradiction can already be seen in the maxim. One cannot have a moral will when doing an

immoral action. For this to be universalized, it would have to be considered moral to act on immoral maxims. That is logically impossible.

A maxim of someone who is fighting against human trafficking would go something like, “I consider coercive control a crime when it is being used to have people commit unhealthy acts because it is abuse.” After imagining a world where this is a universalized maxim, a rational person would likely consider it possible. The maxim, “physical control is considered a criminal act when it is used to have people commit unhealthy acts because it is abuse,” is already a maxim most, if not all, people act on in this world. If this maxim with this form of control can be possible to universalize, it is rational to say that the other maxim with the other form of control is also possible.

A maxim of someone who refuses to accept responsibility for human trafficking would go something like, “I do not hold responsibility for other’s crimes when I have no immediate involvement because it is none of my business.” After imagining a world where this is a universalized maxim, a rational person would likely decide this is impossible. At first thought, it does seem possible for everyone just to mind their own. However, this would eliminate any initiative for people’s desire for leadership. There would be no active engagement to facilitate progression or innovation. It would be an impractical world to live in.

As discovered above, there is only one rational way to approach human trafficking. Since fighting against coercive control is the only universal maxim out of the four, we can assume that Kant would consider it to be a moral duty. Kantian ethics say that all moral agents should have a good will by following their moral duty. In other words, Kantian ethics will consider a person to have good will only if they fight against human trafficking because it is abusive.

There may be conflicts with Kantian ethics when applying this maxim to the real world in which we live. Following through with fighting against human trafficking, may limit the actions of others. Since coercive abuse is not yet well defined, it may restrict the way people interact with others. This conflicts with Kant’s principle of autonomy.

Overall, Kantian ethics does show great accuracy when applied to this current, real-world conflict of human trafficking. The principles are clear and precise. They were able to be applied to the full scope of human trafficking. We were able to use it to examine all perspectives people may have toward the issue. The fact that Kantian ethics could only suggest one out of the four conflicting perceptions to be plausible shows great logical consistency. If it had been plausible to universalize multiple perspectives, it would have created a contradiction within the theory. A singular moral duty concerning human trafficking was defined as well as explained. The conflicts between Kantian ethics and the real-world application, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, can be solved through more studying and understanding of what coercive abuse truly is. At that point, we would be able to carry out the fight against human trafficking without interfering with others' autonomy.