

Critically discuss the claim that both a theory of conduct and a theory of values are required in order to defend the objectivity of reasons for action.

I would like to begin my exploration of this question by quoting from the first formulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative;

"Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction."

And also from the third formulation;

"Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means."

I will be returning to these extracts later on, but it seems appropriate to note here, that Kant was tackling the problem of where our respect for moral values comes from; how do we develop a moral code, and how do we develop rules for right conduct.

Many writers on the subject of ethics have often concentrated on values, and assumed that conduct follows automatically from a knowledge of such values. Various forms of consequentialism, including different varieties of utilitarianism have taken it for granted that knowing the consequences, utility etc, of various actions is sufficient to guide our conduct. Some forms of ethical egoism, such as that advocated by Ayn Rand put self interest at the centre of values, and propose that conduct be determined by this principle. Deontologists usually reverse the order of concern, and place conduct at the centre of debate. Our conduct should be based on duty, and duty is observance of principles based on a priori reasoning, "divine command", or some other form of moral absolutism.

Many problems often arise from this concentration on one single aspect of morality, whether it be values or conduct. Consequentialists often get bogged down in debate about particular applications of "the greater good", or "maximum utility". For example, it seems that R.M Hare's development of a two stage utility was developed to tackle the problem of conduct and values. Rule utilitarianism would deal with values, and act utilitarianism would deal with conduct. Deontologists, in trying to reconcile values and conduct in particular their form of moral absolutism, often seem to be perpetually mired in details of moral conflict.

If we concentrate on both conduct and values, then perhaps we will be able to provide convincing answers to questions such as ;

Why should we care about doing right?

Why should we consider the fate of others?

I believe that it is not possible to answer either of these questions (and others) just by thinking about value systems and codes of conduct. The central problem is not to become a Moses, a Solon or Lycurgas, and write down lofty moral codes, but to tackle head on, the question of how we can make our moral codes take on an objective character. Without objectivity there is no reason for us to be moral. Kant understood this problem well. His first formulation of the Categorical Imperative is very much concerned with the importance of making our inner knowledge of what is right applicable to the whole world. The third formulation, with its concern to regard others as ends, rather than means, hints at how this might be done. It has taken two centuries to tease out the essential truth contained in Kant.

In "The View From Nowhere", Thomas Nagel states what he believes to be the central problem; how do we

"combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included. It is a problem that faces every creature with the impulse and the capacity to transcend its particular point of view and to conceive of the world as a whole."

The objectivity that we attach to our beliefs derives from this process of stepping back from our initial view of values and conduct to form a new conception which relates to the world. We place ourselves in the world that is to be understood. Prior views are then regarded as subjective appearance, correctable and/or confirmable by reference to our new perspective. The process can be repeated, yielding a still more objective conception. We all develop our own unique perspective on the world which incorporates the position of others like ourselves. True, at one end of the scale of subjectivity – objectivity, we have entirely personal ownership of our consciousness, and no-one else can share this. This is true of all others of course, and the important part of this process is that others know of this private "agent relative" area of ourselves, even if they cannot completely share it. They can respect its integrity. In turn, we respect the private worlds of others. There is enough of our unique personal perspective to share "agent neutral" reasons and values with others, and regard them as objective. The important thing about this "two world metaphysic" – the subjective I and the objective I – is that we can engage in moral discourse with others. We can understand, share and correct our judgements of each other.

This process whereby we share and thus objectify our values with others is a delicate matter. If we proceed too far in the objective direction, and leave no place for the subjective, we may arrive at a position of scepticism. It is also true that it does not abolish all

moral controversy. Thomas Nagel shows how deontological issues often conflict with agent neutral reasons. Consider all the thought experiments which involve us in a decision where we can save multiple lives at the expense of sacrificing a single victim. These are cases where sound rational reasons in favour of something can often be challenged by subjective feelings.

In conclusion, I would like to re-emphasise my belief that moral values and codes of conduct need to be seen as objective in some important sense if they are to be regarded as grounded in the proper authority. The sense of objectivity does not spring from anything implicit in the rules themselves; it comes from our sense of ourselves as having a place in the world as a unique subject "I", whilst having a unique perspective which we can share with others.