LOVE, RESPECT, AND INTERFERING WITH OTHERS

BY

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Abstract: The fact that Kantian beneficence is constrained by Kantian respect appears to seriously restrict the Kantian’s moral response to agents who have embraced self-destructive ends. In this paper I defend the Kantian duties of love and respect by arguing that Kantians can recognize attempts to get an agent to change her ends as a legitimate form of beneficence. My argument depends on two key premises. First, that rational nature is not identical to the capacity to set ends, and second, that an agent’s conception of her happiness is not identical to the satisfaction of her ends.

Obligations of beneficence direct us to help others or do good to others. Nearly all contemporary ethical theories acknowledge some duty of beneficence and Kant’s ethics is no exception. Kant maintains we are to make the happiness of others our end and promote, according to our means, the happiness of those in need. Kant notably frames obligatory beneficence in terms of happiness rather than basic welfare or human flourishing. Kant endorses the view that happiness is a highly idiosyncratic notion and makes it clear that we are to promote the happiness of others in accordance with their conception of happiness, not ours. An agent’s happiness is thus not limited to her basic welfare nor is it synonymous with her flourishing. While the latter has its roots in some set of objective criteria (what constitutes a good human life), happiness is subjectively determined to a much greater degree. Kant’s insistence that we promote others’ happiness as they understand it is evidence of how the norm of respect for persons directly informs and constrains the duty of beneficence. Paternalism appears to be unequivocally rejected.

These two features of Kantian beneficence – a focus on happiness rather than flourishing and the rejection of paternalism – make Kant’s formulation of obligatory beneficence an attractive one. Kantian beneficence is
respectful beneficence; executing the duty must be done in such a way that we avoid attempting to force our conception of happiness or the good life upon those who do not share our view. Upon closer examination, however, these features threaten to encumber the Kantian’s moral response in difficult cases – cases where an agent’s conception of her happiness includes ends that are self-destructive and obviously contrary to her wellbeing. What, for instance, could a Kantian recommend as the appropriate moral response to a friend whose favorite recreational activity is shopping and who has, as a result, accumulated a substantial amount of consumer debt?

Helping a friend pursue her consumerist conception of happiness would seem to be irresponsible as well as immoral. To do so would be to commit the moral error Kant calls ‘giving scandal’ – encouraging others to do things for which their conscience could later cause them pain.4 One could, alternatively, simply exclude a consumerist friend from the scope of one’s beneficent conduct. The Kantian duty of beneficence is a wide duty after all; it does not specify precisely whom we should help.5 But this response seems rather cold and uncaring, especially as a response to a friend, someone we presumably care about. A third option would be to try to reform the friend, to get her to revise her conception of happiness so that it is more in line with what is prudent and morally appropriate. The third option embodies elements of both responsibility and care; the problem is that Kantianism appears to be incapable of recognizing the third option as a legitimate form of morally commendable beneficence. Beneficence, according to Kant, is limited to promoting the happiness of others as they understand it, and this does not seem to leave room for reforming others, even if such reform would leave the agent happier than she was before.

An additional worry is that interfering with others, even when beneficently motivated, will be prohibited by the duty of respect. An unsolicited project of reforming a rational, autonomous adult certainly appears to be in tension with the respect we owe to others. The concern, recently articulated by Karen Stohr, is that Kantian beneficence will not only fail to prescribe the appropriate moral response in hard cases, but that Kantian respect may actually forbid it. Kantian respect, according to Stohr, prevents minding another’s business in cases where love demands it.6

My aim in this paper is to defend the Kantian duties of love and respect by demonstrating that these duties do guide us rightly in the hard cases. Kantianism, I will argue, not only allows for more than Stohr recognizes, but in fact calls for more. To see this requires examining the nature of Kantian respect, as well as how Kant conceives of happiness. Once we acknowledge that rational nature is not identical to the capacity to set ends, nor is an agent’s conception of her happiness identical to the satisfaction of her ends, the Kantian duty of beneficence will no longer appear so narrowly confined.
Stohr frames the problem of hard cases quite generally; hard cases are ones in which we find ourselves ‘in relationships with generally rational people who have committed themselves to ends that are not rationally defensible.’ Her examples include agents who are alcoholic, anorexic, or simply ‘failing to see her situation in a fully rational way.’ While these cases may have in some features in common, I want to insist that these hard cases are also dissimilar in morally relevant ways. For example, there is a morally relevant difference between an agent who has the end of enjoying an unhealthy, decadent diet and an agent who is an alcoholic. While the former has embraced an imprudent end, the latter, I will argue, has an impaired will. I thus propose to divide the hard cases into the following three categories: cases of imprudent ends, cases of reasonable disagreement, and cases of impaired wills. Before considering any of the hard cases, however, I want to begin with a simple case. It is my hope that the simple case will reveal features of love and respect which will be of use to us when we turn our attention to the more difficult cases.

1. A simple case of ignorance

Imagine that I am waiting for a train one morning and while I am waiting I strike up a conversation with a fellow traveler. This woman, let us call her Marie, tells me that she lives on the other side of the country and is in town for a conference. The conference concluded the previous evening and she is planning to do some sightseeing before catching her evening flight back home. She tells me that she was torn between visiting the botanical gardens just outside of the city limits and touring some historic homes, but finally decided she would most enjoy the gardens. I happen to know that the botanical gardens are currently closed for a renovation project and will not reopen to the public for another week. I share this information with Marie so that she might rethink how she will spend her one day in the city.

Would it be appropriate to say that I have acted beneficently in this case? Insofar as I saved Marie the time, trouble, and expense of venturing out to gardens she would not have been able to enjoy, it would appear that I have rendered her some benefit. Can it be said that I have helped Marie with regard to one of her ends? Marie’s particular end was to go to the botanical gardens today and I have not helped her to do this. However, if we think about her ends more generally and agree that one of her ends was to enjoy herself by taking advantage of the unique opportunities, then perhaps I have helped her pursue this end. I might also be said to have helped her with one of her ends if we accept that not spending time and money fruitlessly is one of her (standing) ends.

Now imagine that things had gone differently. Imagine that Marie tells me of her plan to visit the botanical gardens and I fail to take the
opportunity to tell her what I know, namely, that the gardens are currently closed to the public. Withholding relevant information of this sort strikes me as not merely ungenerous, but disrespectful as well. This is due to the fact that respecting persons as rational agents (ends in themselves) requires more than simply respecting their ends. Respecting persons as rational agents requires respecting their capacities for self-direction. This includes capacities for end-setting as well as capacities for following rational principles of prudence, which may direct one to revise or abandon particular ends. We have an obligation to abstain from lying not because the truth is necessary for end-setting (it is not), but rather because without accurate information agents cannot direct their lives in appropriate or meaningful ways. Thus the principles of beneficence and respect both provide me with reasons to attempt to correct Marie’s assumption about the botanical gardens. My intention is not to thwart Marie’s end or to get her to change her end. Rather, my aim was to enhance her ability to rationally select and pursue ends by giving her new information.

What the simple case shows us is twofold. First, it brings to our attention the fact that an agent’s ends are a complex, fluctuating, interconnected web that includes particular as well as general ends, the most general of which, according to Kant, is one’s own happiness. An agent may value one end only insofar as she regards it as conducive to or compatible with some other end. Thus, we may fail to focus on what is really important to the agent if we treat some particular end as if it existed in isolation, failing to acknowledge its place in a larger scheme. The simple case also shows us that acts of beneficence and acts of respect are not always easily distinguished. Giving agents the respect they deserve sometimes requires performing helping actions, especially when the helping action is one which improves the agent’s ability to rationally direct her affairs and costs us very little to give. Providing agents with simple, accurate information is an example of this.

2. Imprudent ends

In the simple case of ignorance, we imagined an agent on the verge of harming her interests due to ignorance. The cases we turn to now are cases where an agent is currently engaged in a self-destructive pattern of behavior in virtue of having embraced one or more imprudent ends. The friend mentioned at the beginning of the paper whose favorite recreational activity is shopping and who has, as a result, accumulated a substantial amount of consumer debt would be an example of such an agent. As would the diabetic family member who refuses to eat and exercise responsibly, or the lackadaisical sibling who has been underemployed for several years and spends the majority of his free time sleeping or watching TV. A loved one
who behaves so imprudently will likely be a source of concern to her more
conscientious friends and family. The question before us now is how a
concerned agent should respond.

What is the appropriate moral response in cases of this kind? Stohr’s
concern is that Kantian respect may not permit the moral responses called
for by love, especially when love calls for interference. It will be helpful to
begin by noting the many respectful responses open to the agent con-
fronted with the kind of case described above. One may certainly express
one’s concern to a friend that her present behavior is seriously under-
mining her future happiness. The concerned agent may, and in fact should,
pose gentle, probing questions to her loved one, such as: Are you concerned
about your future wellbeing? Why do you think you act this way? Would you
like to change? How can I help? This stage of enquiry is a necessary
precursor to any beneficent conduct, interfering or otherwise. Respect
counsels me to seek out my loved one’s reasons and to try to understand.

But if I do understand and still think my loved one is making a mistake,
what ought I to do? To what extent is Kantian respect for others compat-
ible with trying to get her to change her ends? I want to suggest that
attempts to persuade another to change her ends are compatible with
Kantian respect provided they meet the following three conditions. First,
any attempt to change another’s end must be motivated by genuine
concern for the agent and not for selfish purposes. Interference which fails
to meet this requirement will risk treating the other as a mere means.

Good intentions, however, by no means guarantee respectful conduct. A
second condition stipulates that attempts to persuade another to change
her ends must appeal to the agent’s rational capacities, not her insecurities
or vulnerabilities. As mentioned before, Kantian respect obliges me to
respect others not simply as end-setters, but as rational agents. I am bound
to respect all of the capacities that are accorded to rational beings, which
will include the capacity to evaluate one’s choice of ends and revise one’s
ends in response to reason and evidence. Thus, I do not fail to give another
the respect she deserves if I offer reasons for thinking that a particular end
is not a prudent one, or if I offer reasons in support of adopting a different
end. In fact, not doing so would seem to be, as in the simple case of
ignorance, both uncaring and disrespectful. To presume that a loved one
cannot be moved by reason or that her ends are fixed and not revisable, is
to regard her as less than a free, rational agent.

The line of demarcation between rational persuasion and disrespectful
manipulation is not always evident to an inattentive agent. But the line is
an important one that the concerned agent should be on guard not to
cross. Thus, while it is consistent with respect for persons to attempt to
persuade another to change her ends with phrases like ‘Numerous studies
show that regular exercise will give you more energy to do the things you
enjoy,’ phrases like, ‘People will stop calling you fat if you lose 20 pounds,’
are not. One might argue that the second phrase is also a reason offered to a loved one. While this may be technically correct, the phrase nonetheless clearly aims to exploit feelings of shame and embarrassment and undermine the agent’s self-esteem.

But what if the self-destructive loved one, aware of the hazards of her behavior, is simply not moved to change? We are, after all, only imperfectly rational beings and the promise of immediate gratification is often a very strong enticement to neglect our future wellbeing. What then is one to do? Assuming the two conditions described above have been met, attempts to induce an agent to change her ends will be respectful if they take the following forms: suggestion, invitation, or offer of assistance. A concerned agent may encourage her loved one to explore new sources of pleasure and satisfaction that, ideally, would replace the imprudent end. She might invite a diabetic for a daily walk or give her healthy recipes. She could invite the consumerist friend to a yoga class or book club meeting, or offer to accompany her to a seminar on financial responsibility. This kind of response is a respectful form of caring. The concerned agent does not stand by and do nothing, but she also does not treat the object of her concern like a child who must be cajoled or tricked into doing what is in her best interest. By offering invitations and assistance I show my loved one that I care; but by giving her the opportunity to decline, I also demonstrate that I respect her prerogative to make decisions for herself.

Thus far I have argued that Kantianism can permit these responses insofar as they are compatible with the respect due to others. This, however, will not fully satisfy critics like Stohr. For, it remains unclear whether Kantianism can recognize attempts to get another to abandon an imprudent end as a legitimate form of beneficence. This is due to the restriction placed on beneficent conduct to promote the happiness of others as they understand it. Stohr contends that ‘If...we are ever warranted in thwarting someone’s actual end or trying to get her to change it, it cannot be under the umbrella of Kantian beneficence. Kantian beneficence must be aimed at the person’s own ends, if it is to count as respecting her as a setter of ends.’ Contra Stohr, I believe Kant’s ethics can recognize attempts to get an agent to change her ends as legitimate forms of beneficence and can do so without abandoning the restriction to promote the happiness of others as they understand it. To see how this is possible requires examining how Kant conceives of happiness.

Kant’s varied descriptions of happiness have prompted some commentators to claim that he endorsed multiple conceptions of happiness which may or may not be consistent with each other. While I think it is fairly clear that Kant employs at least two distinct accounts of happiness, I do not believe they are in tension with one another. Let us consider the first account. Kant describes happiness as ‘a rational being’s consciousness
of the agreeableness of life uninterruptedly accompanying his whole existence, as well as ‘satisfaction with one’s state, so long as one is assured of its lasting,’ and ‘continuous well-being, enjoyment of life, complete satisfaction with one’s condition.’

We are told that ‘for the idea of happiness there is required an absolute whole, a maximum of wellbeing in my present condition and in every future condition.’ According to these descriptions, happiness is an ideal state wherein one enjoys a life characterized by complete and continuous wellbeing, which in turn produces the mental state satisfaction. What is notable about these descriptions is that they all contend that happiness is not something fleeting, enjoyed in the moment; rather happiness is characterized as a stable condition that endures indefinitely into the future. I will refer to this account as the ‘enduring wellbeing and satisfaction’ view of happiness.

A second account of happiness is also found throughout Kant’s work. In the *Groundwork* we are told that happiness consists in the satisfaction of all of one’s needs and inclinations. Recognizing that some of our inclinations may be at odds with others, in the second *Critique* Kant qualifies his earlier description by stipulating that happiness consists in the satisfaction of all of one’s inclinations which ‘can be brought into a tolerable system.’ I will refer to this account as the ‘satisfaction of needs and inclinations’ view of happiness.

The question remains, Are these two accounts of happiness compatible? I believe that they are, but to see this it might be helpful to consider two additional ways happiness is characterized in Kant’s work. First, Kant maintains that happiness is an end that every finite, rational being has by natural necessity. Accordingly, human beings inevitably and unavoidably wish for and seek out their own happiness. Kant further contends that happiness is a problem imposed on human beings by their finite nature. ‘To be happy,’ he writes,

. . . is necessarily the demand of every rational but finite being and therefore an unavoidable determining ground of its faculty of desire. For satisfaction with one’s whole existence is not, as it were, an original possession and a beatitude . . . but is instead a problem imposed on him by his finite nature itself, because he is needy and this need is directed to the matter of his faculty of desire, that is, something related to a subjective feeling of pleasure or displeasure underlying it by which is determined what he needs in order to be satisfied with his condition.

Kant suggests here that human beings necessarily desire a state of enduring satisfaction. Unfortunately, given our epistemic limitations, we cannot say with any certainty what is required to bring about this ideal state. Kant explains,

[It] is a misfortune that the concept of happiness is such an indeterminate concept that, although every human being wishes to attain this, he can still never say determinately and
Kant’s varied descriptions of happiness reflect his view that happiness truly is an elusive concept. But, if it is the case that all finite agents necessarily desire a state of enduring satisfaction with one’s condition, as Kant often suggests, then achieving the ideal state described in the first account of happiness (the enduring wellbeing and satisfaction view) will be a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for achieving the state of affairs described in the second account (the satisfaction of needs and inclinations view). Moreover, if we assume that a human being cannot be completely satisfied with her condition when she has unmet needs or nagging, unsatisfied desires, then it would appear that bringing about the state of affairs described in the second account of happiness is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for achieving the ideal state described in the first. If both assumptions are true, then the two accounts of happiness will be materially equivalent. But even if it cannot be shown that the two accounts are equivalent, provided we do not assume either one to be a complete description of happiness, nothing suggests that the accounts are in tension or that there is any need to choose between them. We can regard them as jointly descriptive of how Kant’s conceives of happiness.

I want to return to Kant’s idea that happiness is a problem for human beings. Kant maintains that happiness is a problem because although we have only an indeterminate idea of what it is we desire, we are nonetheless compelled by our nature to pursue it. How does one pursue something so elusive? Ideally, an agent will employ principles of prudence to bring her desires (both existing and anticipated) into what Kant calls a tolerable system or a harmonized whole. This process will include approving of some desires and rejecting or resisting others. It may also include a ranking of one’s desires, judging the satisfaction of some to be more valuable than others. Here the idea of an ideal state of lasting satisfaction will serves as a guide. It is rational to give preference to those inclinations whose satisfaction is (or is believed to be) consistent with or conducive to a state of lasting contentment.

To pursue one’s own happiness, however, an agent must take up some of her inclinations as ends, and even adopt certain ends in anticipation of future inclinations. Inclinations arise independently of willing, but to have an end, Kant tells us, is always an act of freedom. Something is my end if and only if I regard it as a reason to regulate my conduct and I do regulate my conduct accordingly. Again, prudence, along with the idea of an ideal state of lasting satisfaction will, ideally, guide the selection of ends. Thus, while an agent’s conception of her happiness includes the
satisfaction of her ends as well as her (approved) desires, an agent can only *pursue* her happiness by pursuing a set of particular ends.

Unfortunately, agents do not always resolve the problem of happiness in a perfectly rational way. As the *Groundwork* example of the man suffering from gout demonstrates, inclinations that can be satisfied easily and promise immediate gratification have a distinct advantage over desires that can only (perhaps) be satisfied in the distant future. When the regulating idea of an enduring state of satisfaction is not permitted to make the necessary corrections to restore the balance between the two, conceptions of happiness will be discordant. This will be the case when an agent adopts an end that is incompatible with a large number of her desires regarding her future state.

The cases I am calling cases of imprudent ends are hard cases in virtue of the fact that the agents in question have *internally inconsistent conceptions of their own happiness*. This is to say that their conceptions of happiness are composed of ends and desires that are highly incompatible. For instance, the diabetic described earlier clearly has the *end* of enjoying a decadent diet and a sedentary lifestyle, but it is very likely that he also *desires* other things, such as seeing his grandchildren graduate from high school and college, remaining mobile, independent, and a companion to his spouse for as long as possible. Likewise, while the consumerist friend pursues the *end* of acquiring new, beautiful things, she most likely *desires* other things as well, things such as not being harassed by bill collectors, avoiding bankruptcy, buying a home of her own, and one day enjoying retirement. The problem lies in the fact that, while these agents *desire* these other things, they have not taken up these desires as *ends*, which is to say that they wish for these goods without regarding them as reasons to regulate their conduct. And though these goods are not included among their ends, they are nonetheless constituent of their respective conceptions of their own happiness. For the Kantian notion of happiness includes the satisfaction of one’s desires, as well as the property of extending over time. The happiness we have as our end is a state of satisfaction that endures.

This is the key to seeing how a Kantian can recognize attempts to induce an agent to revise or abandon one or more of her ends as legitimate forms of beneficence. For the restriction on promoting the happiness of others does not stipulate that I may only promote the *ends* of others; rather, I must benefit agents in accordance with their *concepts of happiness*, that is, I must let them decide what is to count as belonging to their happiness.

If the Kantian duty beneficence was just about helping other people achieve the ends, there would be no need to mention a concept like *happiness*, which Kant does far more often than he refers to helping others with their particular ends. That we should be concerned with others’ happiness – their satisfaction with their condition – and not merely the fulfillment of their ends is evident from Kant’s claim that while ‘It is for
them to decide what they count as belonging to their happiness... it is open to me to refuse them many things that they think will make them happy but that I do not.28 In deciding where and when to practice beneficence one of the things to consider is whether the fulfillment of a particular end would actually result in the promotion of the agent’s wellbeing or satisfaction with her condition.

Helping others with their actual ends is likely the best and most respectful way to go about promoting another’s happiness when the agent in question has constructed a more or less coherent conception of happiness. However, when the agent has an internally inconsistent conception of happiness this may no longer be appropriate. In these cases, the appropriate response is to attempt to facilitate revision. If I help a friend satisfy a desire she has with regard to her future wellbeing (such as a desire to avoid bankruptcy) by encouraging her to make the desire an end and assisting her in doing so, I have benefited my friend in accordance with her understanding of her own happiness. Thus I take it to have been shown that, under appropriate circumstances, attempts to get an agent to change her ends are both permitted by Kantian respect and legitimate forms of Kantian beneficence.

One might wonder, as Stohr does, whether love demands more from us in cases where agents are engaged in self-destructive behaviors. There are certainly other options that could be pursued by a concerned agent. I could secretly destroy my friend’s credit cards in order to thwart her attempt a making more purchases, or purge my diabetic father’s pantry of sweets. These responses are clearly incompatible with Kantian respect for persons, but we might wonder whether these responses are rightfully proscribed. Does this prohibition throw needless constraints on our ability to respond as love demands? Provided that they are well-intended, why find such tactics objectionable?

The problems with these manipulative tactics are both practical and moral. On the practical side, it must be noted that these responses merely set up a roadblock for the agent’s execution of self-destructive behavior. They do not change the way the agent views her ends, nor do they aim at this. And if the agent does not change internally, the manipulative interference will have to be repeated indefinitely – that is, until the loved one puts a lock on the pantry or stores her credit cards in a more secure location, which brings us to a second concern. Manipulative interference, even when well-intended, undermines trust. If I suspect you are going to thwart the pursuit of my ends, or that you would even consider doing this, I will likely be defensively discrete about my plans, even going so far as to avoid you, and this will surely hinder your ability to help me.

More importantly, to interfere in the lives of others without their consent is to usurp their authority to direct their lives as they see fit. Respect for others constrains me to recognize that the scope of my

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decision-making authority does not extend into the lives of other competent adults – even when I am well-intending and even when I take myself to know better than they do. Kantian respect might thus be described as a form of humility.

Notably, it is precisely the virtue of humility that Stohr proposes as a preferable, virtue-based, alternative to Kantian respect. The kind of humility she has in mind concerns an agent’s ability ‘to appraise with accuracy one’s own capacities for judgment and effective action, and to act in accordance with those appraisals.’ Stohr concedes that it is difficult to know what is truly best for other people and even more difficult to know how to effectively bring it about. The properly humble person recognizes this and does not overestimate her abilities. Notably, virtuous humility is not thought to be preferable because it constrains agents less. Stohr acknowledges that virtuous humility ‘will likely constrain most of us as much or perhaps even more than Kantian respect would.’ Virtuous humility is thought to be preferable in virtue of the fact that it constrains agents differently.

According to Stohr, virtuous humility constrains in virtue of features of the would-be benefactor, namely her capacities for judgment and action, whereas Kantian respect constrains in virtue of features of the would-be beneficiary, namely her status as an end-setter. But Stohr’s assessment ignores the fact that Kantian respect also constrains in virtue of features of the would-be benefactor. Whereas Stohr’s virtuous humility concerns the proper appraisal of one’s capacities, Kantian respect is a form of humility that is concerned with the proper appraisal of one’s authority. Kantianism tells us that we ought not thwart others’ ends not because we might be wrong about what is truly good for them, or because we might fail to achieve what we aim at, but because we are morally bound to acknowledge that our own wisdom, however perfect it may be, is not a license to disregard another’s right to make decisions about her life free from interference. Stohr would grant such a license to those genuinely in possession of practical wisdom, but I am unconvinced that this is warranted, and still less convinced that love demands it.

3. Reasonable disagreement and risk assessment

There is another kind of case that I want to consider briefly insofar as it is easily confused with cases described in the previous section. I have argued that it is both beneficent and respectful to encourage and assist a loved one in revising her ends when her conception of her own happiness is internally inconsistent, that is, when the pursuit of certain ends in the present undermine nontrivial desires she has regarding to her future wellbeing. However, an agent may have an end that appears (or even is) imprudent
without having an inconsistent conception of her own happiness. In such cases an agent decides, upon reflection, that there is some good the pursuit of which is worth risking all or part of her future wellbeing. The end will appear imprudent to those who disagree about the value of the good sought, but it may nonetheless be a part of a coherent conception of one’s own happiness.

Consider the agent who intends to climb Mt. Everest. To pursue this end is to put oneself at risk of serious physical harm and even death. In addition to the physical risk, it is also a very costly endeavor, especially if one intends to take every safety precaution possible. Climbing Everest is not an end that most of us would consider, and yet people have been trying to reach the summit of Everest, the highest point on Earth, for more than a hundred years. Many have succeeded, but many have also died trying. Can such an end belong to a coherent conception of one’s own happiness? Provided that the agent has considered her future wellbeing, compared what she stands to risk and gain by pursuing the end with what she stands to risk and gain by not pursuing it, I do not see why not. The pain of looking back and seeing missed opportunities or a life not well spent may be a source of deep dissatisfaction with one’s condition.

Climbing Mt. Everest is a rather dramatic example, but it is not hard to find more common examples of ends the pursuit of which may strike a loved one as not only imprudent, but a major life mistake: a friend contemplating having an abortion, a sister who commits to marrying a man she has only known for a couple of weeks, a brother who enlists in the military, a friend who quits her job to live in a monastery, etc. All of these agents are taking risks with their future happiness and wellbeing, but I contend that these at least could be calculated risks. Unlike the previously considered cases of imprudent ends, these agents may not lack regard for their future wellbeing. In fact, it is very likely the benefits to be enjoyed in the future (rather than immediate gratification) are what inspire them to take such risks.

To illustrate that love sometimes demands interfering with those who have ‘rationally indefensible ends,’ Stohr presents the example of Jane Fairfax, one of the characters that populate Jane Austen’s novel Emma. Jane Fairfax has the misfortune of possessing at least as much cleverness, talent, good manners, and natural beauty as the novel’s namesake, Emma Woodhouse, while lacking Emma’s affluence and comfortable home. Stohr contends that Jane lacks wisdom about the value of certain ends, namely the two ends that appear to be her only options for the future: marrying the wealthy Frank Churchill or becoming a governess. According to Stohr, ‘The difficulty about Jane Fairfax is that she is failing to see her own circumstances in a fully rational way. She is certainly a rational agent in Kant’s sense, but her perspective on being a governess is skewed
by her youth, her attachment to the capricious Frank Churchill, and her present emotional state.\textsuperscript{35}

Jane’s opinion of life as a governess is perhaps excessively negative; however, this is due to the fact that she is comparing such a life to one that is clearly superior. While the life of a governess could, under the right circumstances, be a decent life, even a pleasant one, it cannot compare to life as the mistress of Encombe, especially for someone as talented and educated as Jane. Her judgment that the one is inferior to the other is thus quite correct. When Jane’s engagement to Frank Churchill is made public, there is universal agreement that Jane’s happiness will be served by marrying this man who not only loves her, but also can provide very well for her and is also the object of her affection. Jane is congratulated and no asks if she is sure she would not prefer to go to work as a governess.

There can be no doubt that the end of marrying Frank Churchill is quite compatible with both Jane’s happiness and her flourishing and likely more conducive to her happiness and flourishing than life as a governess. The only problem lies in the probability of successfully attaining the end. But less than auspicious odds do not render an end \textit{rationally indefensible}. Moreover, to her credit, Jane’s attachment to the end does not take the form of a total disregard for her future wellbeing. Her judgment is such that she is not prepared to cling indefinitely to the hope of marrying Churchill. Jane makes it clear to Mrs. Elton that she desires to postpone seeking a governess position only for a few months. And we see that Jane is willing to abandon the end of marrying Churchill when the pains of enduring a secret engagement are great and the prospects of success seem miserably slight. Thus, nothing suggests that Jane does not see her circumstances in a fully rational way. It is perfectly rational to be frustrated and distressed when reflecting on one’s lack of freedom and limited opportunities, especially when these are tied to circumstances of birth and not individual merit. And it is perfectly rational to take a risk when the pay-off is high and the potential loss is minimal.

Love is frequently a protective emotion. It is from love that we desire that those most dear to us move through the world cautiously with regard to their safety, their wellbeing, and even their flourishing, to take the least risky route whenever possible.\textsuperscript{36} We are far more likely to approve risks with regard to our own wellbeing than with regard to a loved one’s. But respect counsels us that our loved ones are the authors of their own lives, whose prerogative it is to take risks with their own happiness, even when this makes us uncomfortable.

So, what does one do when a friend is on the verge of making what one has excellent reason to suppose will be a major life mistake? We share our excellent reasons with her. This is, as I have argued, not only consistent with the principle of respect for other persons, but required by it and perhaps by beneficence as well. If our friend is not persuaded, we must

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stand back and let her make what we take to be a major mistake and then stand by to either concede in the future that we were wrong or to offer our love, council, and assistance when we are proved right. In cases of reasonable disagreement, love as a protective emotion may beckon us to thwart the ends of others, but love as a moral principle does not.

4. Impaired wills

The third and final category of hard cases to be considered are cases of impaired wills. These cases will include agents who are chemically dependent on alcohol or narcotics, agents with psychiatric illnesses like depression or anorexia, as well as agents with behavior disorders, such as compulsive gambling. An agent with an impaired will is very different from an agent with an imprudent or immoral end. An agent with an imprudent end chooses poorly and is insufficiently reflective about how best to conduct her life. An agent with an impaired will, however, does not simply choose poorly; rather, her ability to choose is hampered by factors that are physiological, psychological, or most likely both. Thus, an agent may have the imprudent end of achieving an unrealistic body weight without necessarily having an impaired will characteristic of someone with an eating disorder. An eating disorder is a complex, life-threatening, psychiatric illness that requires professional treatment to correct.

Similarly, an agent who intends to spend her Saturday night binge drinking with friends has an imprudent end, and by Kantian standards an immoral end, but it does not follow that she has an impaired will. The agent has an impaired will only if it is the case that she has a genuine chemical dependency, which causes her to feel that she needs the drug in order to be normal. Neurobiologists believe that the strong need for a particular substance that the chemically dependent report feeling, relates to dysregulations of the mesolimbic dopamine system (MDS). Carlton Erickson, a research scientist who has been studying the effects of alcohol on the brain for over 40 years, reports that ‘Chemical dependence is a brain-chemistry-driven, loss-of-control-over-drinking disease characterized by the inability to continually moderate use or remain abstinent, even under adverse consequences.’

When it comes to cases of impaired wills, I believe Kantianism can permit, and even require, a degree of interference that would otherwise be impermissible. Kant recognized that what we owe to others can fluctuate under certain physiological conditions. He writes, for instance, that ‘A human being who is drunk is like a mere animal, not to be treated as a human being.’ Kant does not elaborate on how we ought to treat someone who is drunk, but the idea is that the state of drunkenness warrants a kind of treatment that would not be appropriate or
permissible if the agent were sober. This treatment is warranted in virtue of the fact that the agent’s capacities for judgment and self-control are significantly diminished. Thus a bartender who refuses to serve a customer because of his skin color fails to give the customer the respect he deserves; but a bartender who refuses to serve a *drunken* customer does not. The agent is owed different things in a sober state than in a drunken state.\(^4\)

An agent with an impaired will is like an intoxicated agent, insofar as she is in a state where her capacities for judgment and rational self-direction are diminished. It is in virtue of this state that we may be permitted to interfere with her plans. Stohr asks us to consider a case of this kind. She writes,

> Suppose that my alcoholic friend has just had surgery and is on strict orders to avoid alcohol, on the grounds that it will interfere with the medications she is taking and seriously endanger her health. She persists in drinking anyway, despite my attempts to persuade her with the medical evidence. If I pour out her booze, knowing that she cannot easily get more, I am thwarting her chosen end. Clearly this cannot count as an act of beneficence as Kant understands it. Indeed, it might even be ruled out by the general requirement to respect her as a rational agent. And yet, I’m not convinced that pouring out the booze is always the wrong thing to do...\(^3\)

Despite Stohr’s skepticism, Kantianism does appear to contain resources for recognizing the moral appropriateness of thwarting an alcoholic’s plan to imbibe in circumstances of this kind. The justification for this is twofold. First, we cannot regard an alcoholic’s ‘end’ of getting drunk as just another end adopted by a rational agent. The alcoholic’s desire to imbibe is not an expression of her rational nature. In fact, it is just the opposite. The desire to imbibe, despite disastrous consequences, is an expression of her chemical dependency and the extent to which she is not free. It is doubtful whether the intention to drink in this case would even count as an *end* according to Kantian standards. If an agent’s behavior is pathologically driven and hence not an expression of her rational nature, we have no grounds for respecting it.

Second, a failure to intervene when a loved one is in an impaired state and is putting herself in serious jeopardy seems to be incompatible with properly valuing her. Assuming we are in a position to prevent some serious, perhaps lethal, harm, to stand back and do nothing indicates indifference toward the impaired agent, like watching a child wander into traffic. Kant contends that an attitude of indifference toward others is morally unacceptable.\(^4\) Thus I think the Kantian can agree with Stohr that thwarting the alcoholic’s plans seems to be not only permissible, but called for, at least in cases where the interference aims at preventing some imminent, serious, and possibly irreparable harm.
What is less clear is the Kantian moral principle that would prescribe the interference. When we thwart the plans of an agent with an impaired will, what we aim at is not the promotion of the agent’s ends, happiness, or flourishing. What we aim at is the preservation of the agent herself. This suggests that the interference will not fall neatly under the heading of Kantian beneficence. Thwarting the self-destructive plans of an agent with an impaired will seems to have more in common with cases of easy rescue. In such cases we are thought to have a strict duty to come to the aid of others when their need is great, the costs to us is fairly small, and we are well-positioned to provide what is needed. I cannot attempt to articulate fully the nature and scope of a duty of easy rescue here. I merely suggest that Kant’s ethics can recognize a duty of this kind.

It must be noted and cannot be over-emphasized that successfully thwarting an agent’s self-destructive behavior does not resolve the fundamental problem, which is the pathologically encumbered will itself. Thwarting a destructive agenda merely preserves the possibility of the restoration of the agent’s will in the future. Resolving the fundamental problem requires treatment by professionals and most professionals are unwilling to treat patients without their consent. What then is a concerned agent to do?

Notably, recommendations from The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAA) correspond strikingly well with the Kantian duties of respect, beneficence, and sympathetic participation. The NIAA recommends that friends and family of an alcoholic resolve to stop ‘covering for the alcoholic so that he or she experiences the full consequences of drinking.’ Beyond this, most of the NIAA’s recommendations involve open communication with the drinker. It is recommended that friends and family express their concern, encourage the drinker to seek treatment, gather information about treatment options, help a drinker who is willing to make an appointment with a treatment counselor, and offer to accompany the loved one on the first visit to a treatment program or an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

Similarly, the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA) recommends that friends and family members of a person with an eating disorder express their concern, listen openly, be supportive, patient, and nonjudgmental, suggest that the loved one seek professional help, offer to accompany the loved one to an appointment, and also try to be good role models. The NEDA explicitly recommends that friends and family avoid making threats, using scare tactics to get the loved one into treatment, and trying to control the other person’s life. The most important step towards recovery is for the individual to recognize that he or she needs help and desire to get better.

These recommendations may likely appear too minimal when the one suffering from alcoholism or an eating disorder is our loved one. If I am
truly attached to another I may be very willing, even eager, to expend my time, energy, and financial resources to help the one I love. I may very likely feel a need to do something so that I feel less helpless, and simply expressing my concern and listening may not satisfy this need. However, morally laudable beneficence must be informed by others’ needs, not one’s own. Thus, while an agent may feel deeply conflicted with regard to what she wants to do (force-feed her anorexic daughter, cover-up for her alcoholic spouse) and what she judges she should do (follow professional advice) this is not a moral conflict. Despite what Stohr would have us believe, cases of this kind, while truly hard, are not so in virtue of a profound tension between love and respect.

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NOTES

1 See MS 6:388, 6:453. I use the following abbreviations for the following translations of Kant’s works. Volume and page numbers refer to the Prussian Academy edition of Kant’s gesammelte Schriften.


2 See MS 6:388, 6:454.


4 MS 6:394.

5 See MS 6:390.


7 Ibid., p. 117; emphasis mine.

8 We respect another’s end negatively by not interfering with the pursuit of the end, and positively by helping her achieve her ends.

9 See Hill, Jr., T. E. (1992). ‘Humane as an End in Itself,’ in Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant’s Moral Theory. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992. Stohr’s focus on persons as ‘end-setters’ appears to have a distorting effect on her understanding of Kantian respect. End-setting is emphasized at the expense of acknowledging the relevance of the other capacities that are also characteristic rational agency.

10 One could also frame these cases as instances of agents failing morally with regard to some duty they owe to themselves; however, I am doubtful that doing so would necessarily help us answer the question regarding how a concerned agent should respond.
14 G 4:418.
15 G 4:405. See also G 3:99.
16 KpV 5:73. See also R 6:58.
17 In what follows I will regard the terms ‘inclination’ and ‘desire’ as synonymous.
19 MS 6:387.
20 KpV 5:25, emphasis mine.
21 G 4:418.
23 MS 6:385. *Happiness* is a notable exception to this rule.
24 Part of rationally pursuing a conception of happiness will entail periodically reflecting on and revising one’s ends in light knowledge gained and changes in one’s needs and/or desires.
25 See G 4:399.
26 Stohr understands an agent’s happiness to consist in the satisfaction of her subjective ends (2009, p. 120). Unfortunately, Stohr’s account of happiness has little in common with Kant’s. While her account resembles the ‘satisfaction of needs and inclinations’ view of happiness, she substitutes ‘ends’ for ‘inclinations’. Given that ends are fundamentally different from inclinations, the substitution changes the meaning significantly. Moreover, Stohr’s account ignores entirely the ‘enduring satisfaction’ view of happiness, which I have shown to be prominent in Kant’s work.
27 See MS 6:388, 6:454.
28 MS 6:388.
29 2009, p. 132.
30 Ibid., p. 135.
31 Ibid., p. 132.
32 Whether or not one has the authority to interfere with or thwart the ends of others may depend, in part, on the nature of the relationship that exists between the agents. A parent of a young child certainly has more authority than the parent of an adult, but a spouse may also have more grounds for interference than a friend, and a friend more grounds than a stranger. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* for bringing this point to my attention, though I regret that I cannot explore this issue more fully here.
33 It may also be the case that an agent is so disproportionately concerned with her future wellbeing (e.g. saving every penny) that she neglects her present wellbeing.
34 I am assuming this is not true of the cases of imprudent ends. The consumerist friend does not judge that the purchases she makes now are so important that they are worth risking financial ruin in the future. In cases of imprudent ends, much of the problem lies in the fact that the agent fails to give her future needs and desires adequate consideration.
35 2009, p. 121.

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Emma’s father, Mr. Woodhouse, is an excellent, if extreme, example of this. From benevolent motives Mr. Woodhouse tries desperately, though ineffectively, to dissuade his neighbors from eating wedding cake lest they risk an upset stomach.

Most of Stohr’s examples of agents with ‘rationally indefensible ends,’ with the exception of Jane Fairfax, are cases of this kind. I am proposing that when the agent has a chemical dependency or a psychiatric illness the fundamental problem is an impairment of the agent’s capacities, not simply a rationally indefensible end.

By ‘an agent with an impaired will’ I mean an agent who has impaired judgment and decision-making capacities, as well as an impaired ability to control her behavior. For a more detailed examination of the notion of an impaired will see Wallace, R. J. (2006). ‘Addiction as Defect of the Will: Some Philosophical Reflections,’ in Normativity and the Will. Oxford: Oxford University Press.


Medical professionals face a similar problem when they must decide whether or not to honor a depressed patient’s request to withdraw treatment, given that that depression can profoundly affect a person’s ability to think positively, experience pleasure, or imagine a future different from the present. The depressed state makes it unclear whether the patient’s request meets the standard of informed consent.

I take this to indicate no defect in Kant’s theory. As Thomas E. Hill, Jr. insightfully notes, ‘We should not assume that every issue about helping is determined through the intermediate, minimal, universal principle of beneficence. Particular occasions when we can help others are complex and diverse, and there is no reason to suppose that the only relevant moral consideration guiding our judgments about whether, how, and to what extent we are required to help would be the indefinite imperfect duty of beneficence . . . Considerations of justice, gratitude, respect, and friendship can be highly relevant. They can be grounds for judging that on a particular occasion, helping is not optional’ (Human Welfare and Moral Worth, p. 212).

Thwarting the plans of those with impaired wills is far more paternalistic than the standard case of easy rescue. I contend that the paternalism is nonetheless justified in light of the agent’s impaired state.


See MS 6:395.

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