Normative Ethics

Lecture 4
Merely as a means
The plan for today...

1. The formula of humanity

2. Possible agreement

3. The ethics of the strike
§1. The formula of humanity
‘There is... only a single categorical imperative and it is this...

...act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.’

(Groundwork, p.73)
What Kant is not saying...

An action of a given type is morally wrong if and only if...

...a general rule permitting actions of this type would decrease the total quantity of happiness...
Is there a possible world in which everybody breaks their promises when it suits them...?

If everybody breaks their promises when it suits them then nobody can make a promise...

But nobody can break a promise if nobody can make a promise...
'So act that you use humanity...

...whether in your own person or in the person of any other...

...always at the same time as an end...

...never *merely as a means.*'

*(Groundwork, p.80)*
When do I use someone as a means...?

When I make use of a person’s mind, body, abilities etc. to achieve one of my goals...

When I use one of you to get me a cup of tea...

E.g. when you use my knowledge of ethics to help you pass an exam...
When do I use someone *merely* as a means...?

When I don’t take their interests into account...?

Cf. the scientist who conducts the experiment in the most efficient way regardless of the pain caused to the lab rats...
What if I use somebody as a means...

...and take their interests into account...

...but only a little...

Surely I might still have done something morally impermissible...?
Suppose I save a child from drowning...

But suppose I don’t care in the slightest about this child’s interests...

I only care about the reward and the adulation I’m going to receive...
P1  In saving the child, I was using her merely as a means.

P2  If Kant is right, it is morally impermissible to treat a person merely as a means.

C1  If Kant is right, my action was morally impermissible.

P3  My action was not morally impermissible.
§2. Possible agreement
'...he whom I want to use for my purposes by [a false or lying] promise cannot possibly agree to my way of behaving toward him and so contain the end of this action.'

(Groundwork, p.80)
Whether or not I treat a person merely as a means doesn’t depend on whether I take their interests into account...

…it depends on whether they could have possibly agreed to being treated in this way…
Can a person possibly have agreed to being coerced into doing something...?

If I have agreed to do something then you cannot coerce me into doing it...

Conversely, if you coerce me into doing something, I cannot have agreed to do it...
Can a person possibly have agreed to being deceived into doing something...?

If I have agreed to do something then you cannot deceive me into doing it...

Conversely, if you deceive me into doing something, I cannot have agreed to do it...
P1  It is morally impermissible to treat a person in a particular way if they cannot possibly have agreed to your treating them in this way.

P2  A person cannot possibly have agreed to being coerced or deceived into doing something.

C   It is morally impermissible to coerce or deceive a person into doing this.
‘According to the Formula of Humanity…

...coercion and deception are the most fundamental forms of wrongdoing to others...

...the roots of all evil.’

(Christine Korsgaard, *Right to Lie*, p.333)
‘...if we coerce or deceive others...

...their dissent, and so their genuine consent...

...is in principle ruled out.’

(Onora O’Neill, *Between Consenting Adults*, p.59)
The fatal belief case...

‘I know that, unless I tell you some lie, you will believe truly that Brown committed some murder...

...Since you could not conceal that belief from Brown, he would then murder you as well.’

(Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, p.178)
P1 You could not possibly agree to being deceived into believing that Brown is not the murderer.

P2 If Korsgaard and O’Neill are right, it is morally impermissible for me to treat you in a way to which you could not possibly agree.

P3 It is not morally impermissible for me to deceive you into believing that Brown is not the murderer.
‘...he whom I want to use for my purposes by [a false or lying] promise cannot possibly agree to my way of behaving toward him, and so contain the end of this action.’ (Groundwork, p.80)

Perhaps what matters isn’t whether a person could possibly agree to being treated in this particular way...

...but whether a person could rationally agree to being treated in this particular way...
What is an end...?

‘...what serves the will as the objective ground of its self-determination is an end...’
(Groundwork, p.78)

An end is something that gives me reasons to act or not act in a particular way...
What reasons do I have to treat you or not treat you in a particular way...

...the fact that treating you in this way will make me happy (or will make you happy)...

Happiness is my end in this case...

What if your humanity is my reason to treat you or not treat you in a particular way...?
I treat humanity as an end in itself if I take the fact that you are a human being as giving me reasons to treat you or not treat you in a particular way...

...meaning that there are things I could do to other objects in pursuit of my goals that I cannot do to you...
Have a good vacation!