***Harming Oneself: A Guide***

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This guide is developed to help you understand Shelly Kagan’s “Duties to Oneself,” a section from his textbook *Normative Ethics*. Because the chapter is part of a larger textbook, some of the terminology may be unfamiliar. Where relevant, I highlight and gloss the terminology in my handout.

While this chapter covers several different kinds of duties to oneself, we will be primarily concerned with the duty not to harm oneself.

We will be discussing this chapter on 14 June 2018.

What is a duty?

In order to understand this chapter, we will need to discuss what a duty is. For our purposes, let’s say that we have a duty to *x* just in case one of my moral principles requires me to *x*.

If we are deontologists, we have the following two principles:

1. Maximize welfare.
2. Don’t harm others.

Thus, we say that we have a *duty* to maximize welfare and a *duty* to refrain from harming others.

Duties correspond to ***pro tanto* categorical reasons**. If I have a duty to *x*, then I have a *pro tanto* categorical reason to *x*. Note that *pro tanto* categorical reasons are distinct from all-things-considered categorical reasons.

If we reject the existence of dilemmas, we need a way to **resolve** any conflicts between *pro tanto* categorical reasons. That is, our moral system needs to output **exactly one** all-things-considered categorical reason. This reason corresponds to what I *ought* to do, all-things-considered.

To say that we need to resolve any conflicts between *pro tanto* categorical reasons is just to say that we need to write **precedence rules** for all of our moral principles. These precedence rules always determine which principle we ought to follow, in situations in which we cannot satisfy all of the principles.

*Nota bene*: At various points in this excerpt, SK talks about “pure positive duties.” This is a piece of terminology that, for our purposes, is not helpful. We will ignore it.

Are duties to oneself possible?

In this class, we have focused on delineating what moral principles best explain morality. We have, at various points, distinguished between the question, “What moral principles exist?” and the question, “What *fixes* or *determines* the moral principles?” Roughly, the first question concerns **normative ethics** and the second question concerns **foundational issues in ethics**. In this chapter, SK uses the word **meta-ethics** to mean (very roughly) foundational issues in ethics.

Some philosophers think that what *determines* the moral principles are broad considerations about **how we treat** **others**. If you have this picture of the foundation of ethics, then the foundation will not give rise to principles about how we ought to treat ourselves. So **how we treat ourselves will fall outside the scope of ethics**.

This objection is interesting to note, and these days, many philosophers find it compelling. However, for the purposes of this discussion, we will henceforth exclude this objection from consideration.

Is there a duty not to harm oneself?

For our purposes, we can understand the question, “Is there a duty not to harm oneself?” as synonymous with the question, “Does our deontological principle, don’t do harm, apply to cases of self-harm”? In other words, when we say, “Don’t harm,” is one of the things that we mean, “Don’t harm yourself”?

**Choice Point #1: Is it possible to harm yourself?**

If it’s not possible to harm yourself, then the principle “Don’t do harm” straightforwardly doesn’t apply to cases that seem to involve self-harm. This is because, despite appearances, what we *think* counts as self-harm isn’t, in fact, a case of harm.

At least on first glance, the question seems to have an obvious answer. Yes, of course we can harm ourselves! After all, I can punch myself in the face, thereby causing me pain, and/or impeding my goal of finishing this handout, and/or thwarting my preference not to be punched in the face. Thus, I can cause myself harm.

**Choice Point #2: Does the presence of consent nullify the “Do no harm” principle?**

At this point in the textbook, SK has argued that some people might want to rewrite the principle, “Do no harm” as, “Do no harm without that person’s consent.”

Option #1: Whether or not *x* consents to the harm has no bearing on whether or not it is permissible to harm *x*. (This option rejects rewriting the “Do no harm” principle.)

If this is the case, then the fact that one consents to harming oneself is irrelevant to determining the permissibility of harming oneself.

Option #2: If *x* consents to the harm, then it is permissible to harm *x*.

If this is the case, then it is never impermissible to harm oneself. For surely, if one harms oneself, then one has consented to harming oneself.

Option #3: If *x* consents to the harm, *and has good reason to consent*, then it is permissible to harm *x*.

Perhaps I cannot consent to harm willy-nilly. I must have a good reason to consent to the harm. If this is the case, then one may only permissibly harm oneself when one has good reason to do so.

Suicide

It is sometimes thought that suicide is impermissible. But if the impermissibility of suicide derives from the “Do no harm” principle, and if we emend the “Do no harm” principle in the manner of option #2 and option #3, sometimes suicide *is* permissible. In fact, on option #2, suicide is always permissible. On Option #3, suicide is permissible just so long as you have good reason for suicide.

Sacrificing oneself

It seems that sometimes it is, at minimum, morally permissible to sacrifice oneself in order to save others. This suggests that at least *sometimes*, it is permissible to harm oneself.