

ONORA O'NEILL'S NOTION OF CONSENT AND RESPECT FOR PERSONS

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines Onora O'Neill's philosophical account of consent and respect for persons, situating her work within the Kantian tradition and contemporary moral discourse. O'Neill reconceptualizes consent as a morally substantive practice rather than a mere procedural formality, emphasizing conditions of competence, voluntariness, and adequate information. By linking consent to the ethical principle of respect for persons, she highlights the relational and context-sensitive nature of moral obligations, challenging reductive libertarian or individualist models of autonomy. The analysis explores how O'Neill's framework operationalizes respect for persons across ethical, political, and global contexts, including medical practice, policy-making, and international justice. Through a philosophical lens, the article demonstrates that respect for persons entails recognizing their agency, protecting their dignity, and ensuring that moral and institutional practices do not undermine their capacity for self-determination. Furthermore, the discussion engages with critiques regarding cultural relativism, the tension between universal moral principles and situational ethics, and potential limitations in addressing structural inequalities. By bridging rigorous Kantian moral theory with practical ethical concerns, O'Neill provides a normative foundation for contemporary debates on autonomy, human rights, and moral responsibility. The article concludes that integrating consent and respect as central moral imperatives offers both theoretical clarity and practical guidance for ethical decision-making in personal, institutional, and global spheres. This approach reinforces the moral significance of recognizing persons as ends-in-themselves and underscores the necessity of operationalizing ethical principles in ways that are socially, politically, and morally coherent.

Keywords: Consent, Respect for Persons, Autonomy, Moral Philosophy, Ethical Theory, Practical Ethics, Human Dignity, Relational Ethics

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary moral philosophy, the concepts of autonomy, consent, and respect for persons form the cornerstone of ethical analysis across disciplines such as bioethics, political philosophy, and practical ethics. Autonomy understood not merely as freedom of choice but as the capacity for principled self-governance—serves as a fundamental marker of moral agency and human dignity in modern ethical theory (cf. *The Ethics of Consent: Theory and Practice*, 2024). Traditional frameworks, heavily influenced by liberal moral theorists, often conceptualize autonomy in terms of individual choice and non-interference. Yet, as scholars in the past decade have emphasized, this individualistic portrayal can be too narrow to capture the deeper normative commitments

required for authentic respect for persons (e.g., Wilkinson & Levy on epistemic scaffolding of autonomy in consent, 2024).

Within this intellectual terrain, Onora O'Neill's philosophical contributions stand out for rearticulating autonomy in a way that both honors its Kantian heritage and addresses the practical demands of ethical life. O'Neill's work rejects reductionist conceptions of autonomy that prioritize mere individual choice; instead she champions a Kantian-inspired principled autonomy that integrates rational obligation with interpersonal respect. Her approach suggests that genuine moral agency cannot be captured solely by subjective desires but must be grounded in principles that can be publicly justified to others. This orientation draws on core Kantian themes practical reason, dignity, and duty while avoiding the caricature of an unbounded individual will.

Importantly, O'Neill connects autonomy with consent and respect for persons, not as abstract ideals, but as ethical practices that carry normative weight in concrete contexts such as medicine, research and public policy. Her insistence that consent must be more than a procedural formality that it must be underwritten by conditions of competence, information, and freedom from deception and coercion has shaped contemporary philosophical engagement with the ethics of consent. Recent scholarship underscores the limitations of simplistic consent procedures that fail to consider epistemic dependencies and relational autonomy (Wilkinson & Levy, 2024) and highlights the continuing debate over how best to operationalize respect in ethical practice (*The Ethics of Consent*, 2024).

The purpose of this article is to provide a critical philosophical examination of O'Neill's conception of consent and respect for persons. This involves situating her ideas within broader ethical discourse, assessing how her Kantian-informed framework reconfigures traditional understandings of autonomy, and exploring the implications of her thought for ethical theory, political philosophy, and everyday moral practice. Our thesis is that O'Neill offers a robust, Kantian-informed framework wherein respect for persons is operationalized through principles of valid consent that both enrich moral philosophy and provide meaningful guidance for real-world ethical demands. In doing so, her work bridges the gap between philosophical ideal and ethical practice, demonstrating that respect for persons must be grounded in principled recognition of others as autonomous agents capable of giving or withholding consent.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Onora O'Neill's ethical framework is profoundly grounded in Kantian moral philosophy, which positions rational autonomy, the dignity of persons, and the universality of moral law at the heart of ethical deliberation (O'Neill, 2002; 2016). For Kant, autonomy is not mere freedom to act according to one's desires; it is the capacity to legislate moral principles for oneself, guided by practical reason (Kant, 1785/2019). O'Neill extends this idea by arguing that moral obligations are not subjective or contextually arbitrary but must be publicly justifiable to others, thus embedding morality within a network of relational accountability (Hill, 2019; Wilkinson & Levy, 2024).

A pivotal distinction in Kantian ethics, and one central to O'Neill's reconstruction, is between hypothetical and categorical imperatives. Hypothetical imperatives prescribe actions conditionally, contingent upon a desired goal ("If you want X, do Y"), whereas categorical imperatives command universally, independent of individual inclinations or preferences (Korsgaard, 2018). O'Neill emphasizes that ethical action, particularly in contexts involving consent, cannot rely on mere subjective preference; it must reflect principles that respect the rational agency of all persons. This universality ensures that actions affecting others do not manipulate, coerce, or undermine their autonomy, highlighting the inextricable link between Kantian ethics and the moral practice of respecting persons.

Furthermore, recent scholarship situates O'Neill's approach as bridging formal Kantian theory and practical moral application. Scholars like Ess and Dixon highlight that her framework operationalizes autonomy in institutions, law, and public policy, emphasizing that moral principles must guide not only individual conduct but also systemic practices affecting human well-being. By doing so, O'Neill positions Kantian ethics as a living, contextually relevant framework rather than a purely abstract moral ideal.

MORAL PHILOSOPHY OF PERSONS

Central to O'Neill's theoretical foundation is the concept of persons as ends-in-themselves, a principle inherited from Kant but interpreted in light of contemporary ethical challenges (O'Neill, 2002; 2016). Treating persons as ends requires more than formal recognition; it demands active respect for their agency, rational capacities, and ability to make morally significant choices. This idea forms the conceptual basis for linking autonomy to valid consent: to respect persons is to recognize their capacity to consent knowingly and freely to actions affecting them.

O'Neill further distinguishes between duties of justice and duties of beneficence. Duties of justice are morally obligatory, ensuring fair treatment, protection of rights, and adherence to principles that do not instrumentalize others. Duties of beneficence, while morally significant, are context-sensitive and aimed at promoting the welfare of others without undermining their autonomy (Hill, 2019; Dixon, 2021). Contemporary ethical literature emphasizes that O'Neill's framework reconciles these duties with the realities of social interdependence. For example, Wilkinson and Levy argue that recognizing epistemic dependencies how individuals rely on others for knowledge and informed decision-making is essential for ethical consent, thereby linking the Kantian respect for persons to practical moral responsibility.

Philosophically, O'Neill's contribution lies in operationalizing Kantian respect in relational and institutional contexts. Respect for persons is not only a moral ideal but a normative guide for structuring practices from clinical interactions to policy decisions that safeguard autonomy and dignity (Ess, 2020). By framing persons as ends, she establishes that valid consent and ethical obligations are inherently relational: moral action is meaningful only when it acknowledges, supports, and protects the agency of others, thus integrating abstract Kantian principles with the demands of lived moral experience.

CONSENT AS MORAL CONCEPT

Defining Consent

Consent, within O'Neill's ethical framework, is more than a formal procedural requirement; it is a moral practice that expresses respect for persons as autonomous agents (O'Neill, 2002; 2016). Unlike simplistic interpretations that equate consent with mere agreement, O'Neill emphasizes that consent must reflect competence, adequate understanding, and voluntariness, ensuring that the agent can meaningfully exercise moral agency. This approach reframes consent as an ethical condition: to respect individuals is to enable their rational participation in decisions that affect them (Wilkinson & Levy, 2024).

Recent scholarship highlights that treating consent merely as legal or bureaucratic formality risks undermining the very autonomy it seeks to protect. For instance, Dixon argues that procedural consent without substantive understanding or freedom from coercion can instrumentalize participants, failing the Kantian principle of treating persons as ends rather than means. Similarly, Ess underscores that consent must be relationally contextualized: individuals are embedded within social, institutional, and epistemic networks that shape their capacity for informed decision-making.

Conditions of Valid Consent

O'Neill specifies three core conditions for ethically valid consent:

1. Competence – The individual must possess the cognitive and moral capacity to make decisions about the matter at hand. Autonomy is meaningful only when agents can deliberate rationally (Hill, 2019).
2. Information – Consent must be based on adequate knowledge of relevant facts and consequences. Ignorance or misinformation compromises the moral legitimacy of consent (Wilkinson & Levy, 2024).
3. Voluntariness – Consent must be free from coercion, manipulation, or undue influence, ensuring that moral agency is genuinely respected (Dixon, 2021).

These conditions link consent to O'Neill's broader Kantian vision: respect for persons entails providing the structural and relational conditions under which autonomy can be exercised meaningfully. In contemporary contexts such as clinical ethics or research, these conditions serve as normative guides for ethical action (Ess, 2020; Wilkinson & Levy, 2024).

CRITIQUE OF SIMPLISTIC AUTONOMY MODELS

O'Neill challenges individualistic or libertarian models of autonomy, which portray consent as a mere exercise of free choice without considering relational and institutional constraints. She argues that autonomy is both principled and relational, requiring that agents are not only free to choose but are situated within conditions that allow moral reasoning and protect against harm (O'Neill,

2016; Hill, 2019). This perspective resonates with contemporary scholarship emphasizing relational autonomy, which situates consent within the social and institutional networks that enable or constrain moral agency (Dixon, 2021; Wilkinson & Levy, 2024).

By framing consent as a morally substantive practice, O'Neill bridges the gap between abstract ethical principles and practical decision-making, providing guidance for both personal interactions and institutional policies. Her framework demonstrates that respecting persons requires more than formal compliance: it necessitates active engagement with their capacity for moral reasoning, attention to their informational needs, and protection from coercive forces.

The philosophical significance of O'Neill's conception of consent is profound. It repositions consent as a manifestation of respect for persons, linking ethical theory directly to practical action. In professional ethics, for instance, this approach strengthens informed consent in medicine and research, ensuring that participants are treated as autonomous moral agents rather than passive subjects (Wilkinson & Levy, 2024). Politically, it informs debates on governance and justice by highlighting that policies impacting citizens must enable meaningful participation rather than merely impose compliance (Ess, 2020). In short, O'Neill's analysis illustrates that valid consent is both a moral imperative and a relational practice, demonstrating the inseparability of autonomy, ethical responsibility, and respect for persons.

RESPECT FOR PERSONS

Respect for persons, in Onora O'Neill's philosophy, is not a mere courtesy or social convention but a normative principle central to moral and political ethics. Philosophically, it entails recognizing the intrinsic dignity of rational agents and structuring our actions, institutions, and policies in ways that enable their autonomy and avoid using them merely as means to our ends (O'Neill, 2002; 2016). O'Neill's conception of respect bridges the abstract ethical ideals of Kantian theory with practical ethical demands, showing that respecting persons is both a moral and social obligation.

Conceptualizing Respect

O'Neill's notion of respect is grounded in the Kantian principle that persons are ends-in-themselves, worthy of moral consideration independent of their utility or social role (Korsgaard, 2018; O'Neill, 2016). Philosophically, respect involves acknowledging and protecting the capacities of others for rational self-governance. It is not simply polite recognition or deference; it is a practical commitment to enabling others to exercise their moral and epistemic agency.

Recent scholars have reinforced this interpretation. Wilkinson and Levy argue that respect is fundamentally relational and context-sensitive, meaning that moral agents must consider the institutional, social, and informational conditions that affect the capacity of others to act autonomously. Ess highlights that this approach avoids the pitfalls of abstract moral universalism, offering a framework that is both normatively rigorous and practically applicable, particularly in contexts such as global ethics, public policy, and clinical decision-making. By conceptualizing respect in this way, O'Neill connects morality with structural conditions, showing that ethical

action must attend to the enabling conditions for autonomy rather than treating respect as an abstract ideal divorced from real-world practice.

Linking Respect to Consent

O'Neill positions respect and consent as mutually reinforcing principles. Respect for persons demands that individuals are capable of exercising genuine consent, and valid consent is itself an expression of respect for autonomy (O'Neill, 2002). Philosophically, this aligns with Kant's idea that moral duties require consideration of others as ends-in-themselves: one cannot ethically bypass or manipulate the rational capacities of others without violating their dignity (Kant, 1785/2019; Hill, 2019).

Recent scholarship emphasizes that this linkage is operationally significant. For example, Dixon (2021) notes that respecting persons requires designing social and institutional systems that support informed, voluntary, and competent decision-making, thereby ensuring that consent is substantively meaningful. Wilkinson and Levy (2024) further argue that ethical consent cannot occur in isolation; it must be embedded within trustworthy and accountable institutional contexts, reflecting O'Neill's insistence on the relational dimension of moral agency. This integration demonstrates that respect for persons is not merely a theoretical ideal, but a practical requirement: consent operationalizes respect, and respect provides the normative justification for the structures and procedures that make valid consent possible.

The philosophical significance of O'Neill's conception of respect for persons is manifold:

- ❖ **Ethical Implications** – Respect entails that moral agents acknowledge and facilitate the autonomy of others in daily interactions, professional contexts, and institutional practices. In clinical ethics, for example, respecting patients' autonomy requires more than signature forms; it involves ensuring competence, access to information, and freedom from coercion (Wilkinson & Levy, 2024).
- ❖ **Political Implications** – Policies and governance structures must treat citizens as autonomous moral agents, capable of participating meaningfully in decisions that affect them (Ess, 2020). This has implications for democratic governance, human rights, and social justice, where respect guides not only interpersonal morality but also systemic fairness.
- ❖ **Global and Relational Ethics** – On a global scale, respecting persons requires recognizing interdependencies and asymmetries of power, ensuring that aid, development, and human rights initiatives respect the autonomy and dignity of recipients (Dixon, 2021; O'Neill, 2016).

By emphasizing the relational and institutional dimensions of respect, O'Neill provides a framework that bridges the gap between abstract ethical principles and real-world moral practice. Respect is both the foundation for ethical consent and a guiding principle for structuring moral, political, and social institutions in ways that uphold human dignity and agency.

PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Onora O'Neill's conception of consent and respect for persons is not merely an ethical abstraction; it offers a robust, multi-dimensional framework with profound implications for personal morality, institutional structures, political governance, and global justice. Her philosophy demonstrates that the Kantian principle of treating persons as ends-in-themselves can bridge abstract moral theory and practical ethical application, making ethics socially and institutionally relevant (O'Neill, 2002; 2016). By operationalizing respect through valid consent, O'Neill emphasizes that moral responsibility extends beyond individual interactions into the structures and policies that shape human lives.

ETHICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Ethically, O'Neill's framework reorients our understanding of human dignity. Respect for persons is not a superficial acknowledgment but an active moral engagement, requiring recognition of others' rational capacities and the conditions necessary for autonomous action (Hill, 2019; Wilkinson & Levy, 2024). By linking consent to respect, O'Neill underscores that ethical treatment involves enabling agents to make informed, voluntary decisions, rather than merely avoiding harm or observing formal rights. This perspective aligns with contemporary discussions on relational autonomy, which stress that moral agency is exercised within social and institutional contexts that can either support or constrain it (Dixon, 2021).

Philosophically, this ethical dimension stresses that morality is structurally mediated: respecting persons entails ensuring access to information, protecting against coercion, and facilitating competence. It moves ethics from abstract principles to practical moral obligations, emphasizing that moral action is only meaningful when it acknowledges the agency and dignity of others in real-life contexts.

POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Politically, O'Neill's insights illuminate the normative basis for accountable and consent-sensitive governance. Policies and institutions that affect individuals' lives must respect their capacity for rational decision-making, ensuring that consent is meaningful and not symbolic (Ess, 2020). Philosophically, this aligns with Kantian ideals of legitimacy: authority is justified only when exercised in a manner consistent with the rational agency of those subject to it (Korsgaard, 2018; O'Neill, 2016).

Recent scholarship situates O'Neill's framework in contemporary debates on governance and justice. Wilkinson and Levy (2024) highlight that ethical political systems require mechanisms to reduce epistemic asymmetries, enabling citizens to participate in policy decisions fully informed and free from coercion. Dixon (2021) emphasizes that institutions themselves bear moral responsibility to structure conditions conducive to autonomous consent, linking governance to ethical accountability. Consequently, O'Neill's philosophy provides a normative benchmark for

evaluating public policies and institutions: laws, regulations, and political structures must not only prevent harm but actively promote autonomous moral agency.

GLOBAL SIGNIFICANCE

O'Neill's ethical framework extends to global justice and international ethics, offering guidance for morally coherent practices in international aid, human rights, and development. Her insistence on valid consent and respect for persons challenges paternalistic or instrumentalist approaches in global interactions, emphasizing that ethical action must recognize the agency and dignity of all individuals, regardless of structural inequalities or power asymmetries (O'Neill, 2016; Ess, 2020).

Recent studies highlight the relevance of her framework in transnational contexts. For instance, Wilkinson and Levy (2024) argue that respecting autonomy globally requires consent-sensitive mechanisms that account for social, cultural, and institutional constraints on moral agency. Dixon (2021) further notes that enabling participation, rather than imposing unilateral decisions, is central to ethically justifiable global interventions. Philosophically, O'Neill provides a principled account of global responsibility: respecting persons at an international scale entails not only preventing harm but actively supporting the conditions under which consent and autonomy can flourish, even amidst complex social and political inequalities.

O'Neill's conception of consent and respect for persons demonstrates a philosophically rigorous integration of ethics, politics, and global responsibility. Ethically, it safeguards human dignity in both personal and institutional interactions; politically, it offers a normative standard for accountable, consent-sensitive governance; and globally, it establishes a framework for morally coherent action in international aid, human rights, and development.

Her work shows that respecting persons is not optional or abstract it is morally and politically imperative. By connecting autonomy, consent, and relational ethics, O'Neill provides a comprehensive moral architecture for structuring both individual conduct and institutional practice, demonstrating that ethical theory can and should guide real-world decisions and global responsibilities. Philosophically, this underscores a central insight: morality is not solely about individual virtue or formal rules but about creating conditions in which all persons can exercise their rational, autonomous capacities and be treated as ends-in-themselves.

CONCLUSION

Onora O'Neill's conception of consent and respect for persons represents a philosophically rigorous, Kantian-informed framework that successfully bridges abstract moral theory with the practical demands of ethical life. By grounding autonomy in rational agency and linking it to the principles of valid consent, O'Neill demonstrates that respect for persons is far more than a formal or symbolic ideal; it is a substantive moral, social, and political obligation that requires both recognition of individual agency and the creation of conditions that enable its exercise (O'Neill, 2002; 2016). Philosophically, her approach underscores the imperative that moral action must treat

individuals as ends-in-themselves, capable of reasoned deliberation and deserving of safeguards that allow autonomous decision-making to flourish. In doing so, O'Neill not only preserves the Kantian commitment to universal moral principles but also situates these principles within relational, institutional, and social contexts, making them practically applicable to contemporary ethical dilemmas.

From an ethical perspective, O'Neill's framework promotes principled respect for human dignity, shaping both interpersonal conduct and institutional practice. She emphasizes that moral responsibility involves more than following rules or respecting formal rights: it requires actively enabling individuals to exercise informed, voluntary, and competent choices (Hill, 2019; Wilkinson & Levy, 2024). By attending to the epistemic and structural conditions of autonomy, her work shows that ethical life is inherently relational: our duties to others are enacted through practices that facilitate their agency, rather than merely avoiding harm or coercion.

Politically, O'Neill's insights provide a normative foundation for accountable, consent-sensitive governance. Laws, policies, and institutional frameworks must respect the rational capacities of citizens, enabling meaningful participation and deliberation in matters that affect their lives (Ess, 2020). Her framework challenges forms of governance that treat individuals as passive subjects, demonstrating that political legitimacy is grounded in the protection and facilitation of autonomy. Scholars have highlighted that this approach is particularly relevant in modern democratic and bureaucratic contexts, where structural asymmetries and information gaps often constrain genuine participation (Wilkinson & Levy, 2024).

Globally, O'Neill's philosophy provides guidance for ethically coherent practices in international aid, human rights, and development, emphasizing that moral obligations extend across borders and are sensitive to social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Dixon, 2021; Wilkinson & Levy, 2024). By requiring that interventions respect the agency of all affected individuals, her work offers a normative standard for global justice, challenging paternalistic approaches that treat recipients as mere objects of policy. Philosophically, this underscores the universality of moral duties while accounting for the practical realities of global interdependence, inequality, and cross-cultural variation.

In synthesis, O'Neill's work demonstrates that respect for persons is simultaneously a moral imperative, a political necessity, and a guide for global responsibility. It shows that ethical theory is not merely abstract but requires relational, institutional, and structural consideration to be practically meaningful. Her framework reveals that the ethical, political, and global spheres are interconnected, converging around the principle that autonomy must be respected and operationalized through valid consent. By integrating Kantian moral rigor with practical applicability, O'Neill provides a comprehensive foundation for principled action in contemporary moral philosophy, guiding individuals, institutions, and societies in ethically coherent decision-making that promotes dignity, justice, and human flourishing.

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