

Kantian Theory: The Idea of Human Dignity

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The great German philosopher Immanuel Kant thought that human beings occupy a special place in creation. Of course he was not alone in thinking this. It is an old idea: from ancient times, humans have considered themselves to be essentially different from all other creatures—and not just different but *better*. In fact, humans have traditionally thought themselves to be quite fabulous. Kant certainly did. [I]n his view, human beings have “an intrinsic worth, i.e., *dignity*,” which makes them valuable “above all price.” Other animals, by contrast, have value only insofar as they serve human purposes. In his *Lecture on Ethics* (1779), Kant said:

But so far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals ... are there merely as means to an end. That end is man.

We can, therefore, use animals in any way we please. We do not even _ have a “direct duty” to refrain from torturing them. Kant admits that it is , probably wrong to torture them, but the reason is not that *they* would be hurt; the reason is only that *we* might suffer indirectly as a result of it, because “he who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men.” Thus [i]n Kant’s view, mere animals have *no* importance at all. Human beings are, however, another story entirely. According to Kant, humans may never be “used” as means to an end. He even went so far as to suggest that this is the ultimate law of morality.

Like many other philosophers, Kant believed that morality can be summed up in one ultimate principle from which all our duties and obligations are derived. He called this principle *The Categorical Imperative*. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) he expressed it like this:

Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

However, Kant also gave *another* formulation of The Categorical Imperative. Later in the same book, he said that the ultimate moral principle may be understood as saying:

Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.

Scholars have wondered ever since why Kant thought these two rules were equivalent. They *seem* to express very different moral conceptions. Are they, as he apparently believed, two versions of the same basic idea, or are they really different ideas? We will not pause over this question. Instead we will concentrate here on Kant’s belief that morality requires us to treat persons “always as an end and never as a means only.” What exactly does this mean, and why did he think it true?

When Kant said that the value of human beings “is above all price,” he did not intend this as mere rhetoric but as an objective judgment about the place of human beings in the scheme of things. There are two important facts about people that, in his view, support this judgment.

First, because people have desires and ‘goals, other things have value *for them*, in relation to *their* projects. Mere “things” (and this includes nonhuman animals, whom Kant considered unable to have self-conscious desires and goals) have value only as means to ends, and it is human ends that *give* them value. Thus if you want to become a better chess player, a book of chess instruction will have value for you; but apart from such ends the book has no value . Or if you want to travel about, a car will have value for you; but apart from this desire the car will have no value.

Second, and even more important, humans have “an intrinsic worth, i.e., *dignity*,” because they are *rational agents* - that is, free agents capable of making their own decisions, setting their own goals, and guiding their conduct by reason. Because the moral law is the law of reason, rational beings are the embodiment of the moral law itself. The only way that moral goodness can exist at all in the world is for rational creatures to apprehend what they should do and, acting from a sense of duty, do it. This, Kant thought, is the *only* thing that has “moral worth.” Thus-if there were no rational beings, the moral dimension of the world would simply disappear.

It makes no sense, therefore, to regard rational beings merely as one kind of valuable thing among others. They are the beings *for whom* mere “things” have value, and they are the beings whose conscientious actions have moral worth. So Kant concludes that their value must be absolute, and not comparable to the value of anything else.

If their value is “beyond all price,” it follows that rational beings must be treated “always as an end, and never as a ‘means only.’” This means; on the most superficial level, that we have a strict duty of beneficence toward other persons: we must strive to promote their welfare; we must respect their rights, avoid harming them, and generally “endeavor, so far as we can, to further the ends of others.”

But Kant’s idea also has a somewhat deeper implication. The beings we are talking about are *rational* beings, and “treating them as ends-in-themselves” means *respecting their rationality*. Thus we may never *manipulate* people, or *use* people, to achieve our purposes, no matter how good those purposes may be. Kant gives this example, which is similar to ‘ an example he uses to illustrate the first version of his categorical imperative: Suppose you need money, and so you want a “loan,” but you know you will not be able to repay it. In desperation, you consider making a false promise (to repay) in order to trick a friend into giving you the money. May you do this? Perhaps you need the money for a good purpose—so good, in fact, that you might convince yourself the lie would be justified. Nevertheless, if you lied to your friend, you would merely be manipulating him and using him “as a means.”

On the other hand, what would it be like to treat your friend “as an end”? Suppose you told the truth, that you need the money for a certain purpose but will not be able to repay it. Then your friend could make up his own mind about whether to let you have it. He could exercise his own powers of reason, consulting his own

values and wishes, and make a free, autonomous choice. If he did decide to give the money for this purpose, he would be choosing to make that purpose *his own*. Thus you would not merely be using him as a means to achieving *your* goal. This is what Kant meant when he said, "Rational beings ... must always be esteemed at the same time as ends, i.e., only as beings who must be able to contain in themselves the end of the very same action."

Now Kant's conception of human dignity is not easy to grasp; it is, in fact, probably the most difficult notion discussed [here]. We need to find a way to make the idea clearer. In order to do that, we will consider in some detail one of its most important applications-this may be better than a dry, theoretical discussion. Kant believed that if we take the idea of human dignity seriously, we will be able to understand the practice of criminal punishment in a new and revealing way.

On the face of it, it seems unlikely that we could describe punishing someone as "respecting him as a person" or as "treating him as an end-in-himself." How could taking away someone's freedom, by sending him to prison, be a way of "respecting" him? Yet that is exactly what Kant suggests. Even more paradoxically, he implies that *executing* someone may also be a way of treating him "as an end." How can this be?

Remember that, for Kant, treating someone as in "end-in-himself" means treating him *as a rational being*. Thus we have to ask, What does it mean to treat someone as a rational being? Now a rational being is someone who is capable of reasoning about his conduct and who freely decides what he will do, on the basis of his own rational conception of what is best. Because he has these capacities, a rational being is *responsible* for his actions. We need to bear in mind the difference between: and

1. *Treating someone as a responsible being*

2. *Treating someone as a being who is not responsible for his conduct.*

Mere animals, who lack reason, are not responsible for their actions; nor are people who are mentally "sick" and not in control of themselves. In such cases it would be absurd to try to "hold them accountable." We could not properly feel gratitude or resentment toward them, for they are not responsible for any good or ill they cause. Moreover, we cannot expect them to understand why we treat them as we do, any more than they understand why they behave as they do. So we have no choice but to deal with them by manipulating them, rather than by addressing them as autonomous individuals. When we spank a dog who has urinated on the rug, for example, we may do so in an attempt to prevent him from doing it again - but we are merely trying to "train" him. We could not reason with him even if we wanted to. The same goes for mentally "sick" humans.

On the other hand, rational beings are responsible for their behavior and so may properly be "held accountable" for what they do. We may feel gratitude when they behave well, and resentment when they behave badly. Reward and punishment - not "training" or other manipulation - are the natural expression of this gratitude and resentment. Thus in punishing people, we are *holding them responsible* for their actions, in a way in which we cannot hold mere animals responsible. We are

responding to them not as people who are "sick" or who have no control over themselves, but as people who have freely chosen their evil deeds.

Furthermore, in dealing with responsible agents, we may properly allow *their conduct* to determine, at least in part, how we respond to them. If someone has been kind to you, you may respond by being generous in return; and if someone is nasty to you, you may also take that into account in deciding how to deal with him or her. And why shouldn't you? Why should you treat everyone alike, regardless of how *they* have chosen to behave?

Kant gives this last point a distinctive twist. There is, [i]n his view, a deep logical reason for responding to other people "in kind." The first formulation of The Categorical Imperative comes into play here. When we 'decide' what to do, we in effect proclaim our wish that our conduct be made into a "universal law." Therefore, when a rational being decides to treat people in a certain way, he decrees that in his judgment *this is the way people are to be treated*. Thus if we treat him the same way in return, we are doing nothing more than treating him as *he has decided* people are to be treated. If he treats others badly, and we treat him badly, we are complying with his own decision. (Of course, if he treats others well, and we treat him well in return, we are also complying with the choice he has made.) We are allowing *him* to decide how he is to be treated-and so we are, in a perfectly clear sense, respecting his judgment, by allowing it to control our treatment of him. Thus Kant says of the criminal, "His own evil deed draws the punishment upon himself."