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Humanity as an End in Itself

Thomas E. Hill, Jr.

Few formulas in philosophy have been so widely accepted and variously interpreted as Kant's injunction to treat humanity as an end in itself. For some it is a specific antidote to utilitarianism, prohibiting all kinds of manipulation and exploitation of individuals for selfish or even altruistic ends. For others it is a general reminder that "people count," that no one's interests should be disregarded. Sometimes the formula is viewed as a principle of respect for persons, but it has also been treated as a principle of benevolence. The fact that the formula seems so adaptable for the expression of different ideas may, in fact, explain some of its appeal. Without denying that there are elements in Kant's writing which suggest alternative interpretations, I shall reconstruct what seems to me the main line of his thought about humanity as an end in itself. The interpretation I propose enables Kant to meet many of the objections that critics have raised against his formula, but it also reflects an extreme moral stand that few of us, I suspect, could accept without modification.

I

Kant's principle, the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, is introduced as follows: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end."¹ The first problem of interpretation is to see what is meant by the phrase

1. G 96 (429). The following abbreviations are used throughout the paper. G for *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); MEJ for *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, trans. John Ladd (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965); MEV for *Metaphysical Elements of Virtue*, trans. James Ellington (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1964); DV for *The Doctrine of Virtue*, trans. Mary Gregor (New York: Harper & Row, 1964); CPrR for *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1956); R for *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960); L for *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (New York: Harper & Row, 1963). MEV and DV are alternative translations of the second part of Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*; the latter, often preferable, is unfortunately less readily available. The second numbers (in parentheses or brackets) refer to page numbers in the corresponding volumes of the Prussian Academy edition of Kant's works.

“humanity *in* a person.” On the usual reading this is treated as a quaint way of saying “a human person.” That is, treating humanity in persons as an end is just to treat human beings as ends. “Humanity,” on this view, refers to the class of human beings, and what is meant is simply that each member of the class is to be treated as an end. This reading is a natural one, for Kant does speak of persons and “rational beings” as ends in themselves (G 97 [430]; G 104 [436]; G 105 [437]), and human beings are the only persons and rational beings we know. Translators sometimes encourage this interpretation by rendering “*Menschheit*” as “man” instead of “humanity.” There is no temptation to think of “man” as referring to something in a person, or a characteristic of a person, though “humanity” can be so understood, for example, when we contrast a person’s animality with his humanity or when a theologian contrasts the divinity of Jesus with his humanity.

A review of Kant’s repeated use of “humanity in a person” in his *Metaphysics of Morals* and elsewhere strongly suggests that, contrary to the usual reading, Kant thought of humanity as a characteristic, or set of characteristics, of persons. Kant says, for example, that we can even contemplate a rogue with pleasure when we distinguish between his humanity and the man himself (L 196–97; DV 107 [441]; MEV 104 [441]). Again, humanity is contrasted with our animality; and it is said to be something entrusted to us for preservation (DV 51 [392], 85 [423]; MEV 50, 84). Its distinguishing feature is said to be “the power to set ends,” and we are supposed to respect it even in those who make themselves unworthy of it (DV 51 [392]; MEV 50; DV 133 [463]; MEV 128). Thus, though Kant probably intended “persons are ends” and “humanity in persons is an end” to be equivalent for all practical purposes, I suggest that the former is best construed as an abbreviation for the latter rather than the reverse (as the usual reading has it).

Unfortunately the texts are not unequivocal about exactly what characteristics make up our humanity. In the *Groundwork* the “rational nature” of human beings is clearly intended to be included under, if not identified with, their humanity. Kant writes, for example, of the paradox that “the mere dignity of humanity, that is, of rational nature in man . . . should function as an inflexible precept for the will . . . ” (G 106 [439]). In the original German, however, it is not so definite that rationality is the only feature of humanity. The phrase “*die Wurde der Menschheit als vernunftiger Natur*” could as well be “the dignity of humanity as (i.e., insofar as it includes) rational nature.” Another passage suggests that various human talents are part of our humanity. “Now there are in humanity [*Menschheit*] capacities for greater perfection which form part of nature’s purpose for humanity in our person. To neglect these can admittedly be compatible with the maintenance of humanity as an end in itself, but not with the promotion of this end” (G 97–98 [430]). These “capacities for greater perfection” are the same as

what is referred to earlier as "fortunate natural aptitudes," "natural gifts," and "powers . . . given . . . for all sorts of possible ends" (G 90 [423]). In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, however, Kant seems to distinguish these powers from humanity in persons. He says that the characteristic of humanity, as distinct from animality, is "the power to set an end . . . any end whatsoever" (DV 51 [392]; MEV 50). The development of talents is not said to *be* an instance of promoting humanity but rather what must be done to make us *worthy* of humanity (DV 51 [392]; MEV 50). Another passage implies at least that physical abilities are not part of humanity in us, for humanity is identified with our noumenal personality as distinct from the phenomenal, or observable, person (DV 85 [423]; MEV 84). Given Kant's repeated insistence on formulating the supreme moral principle independently of contingent assumptions, I think it is most reasonable to construe "humanity" as including only those powers necessarily associated with rationality and "the power to set ends."

More specifically, these characteristics in Kant's view entail the following. First, humanity includes the capacity and disposition to act on principles or maxims, at least in the broad sense which encompasses all acting for reasons (G 80 [412]). Second, humanity includes the capacity and disposition to follow rational principles of prudence and efficiency, that is, hypothetical imperatives, at least so far as these do not conflict with more stringent rational principles (G 82–83 [414–15]). Third, as a "power to set any end whatsoever," humanity is thought to include a kind of freedom which lower animals lack—ability to foresee future consequences, adopt long-range goals, resist immediate temptation, and even to commit oneself to ends for which one has no sensuous desire (G 114–16 [446–49]). Fourth, humanity as rational nature necessarily (though not analytically) includes acceptance ("legislating to oneself") of certain unconditional principles of conduct, that is, categorical imperatives, independently of fear of punishment and promise of reward (G 83–84 [416]; G 108 [440]). This implies that anyone who has humanity has a capacity and disposition to follow such principles; but since his rationality may be imperfect or counteracted by other features, he may not always follow these principles (G 81 [413–14]). Fifth, as rational nature encompasses theoretical as well as practical reason, humanity must also include some ability to understand the world and to reason abstractly.

Humanity, so conceived, is attributed by Kant to even the most foolish and depraved persons (L 197; DV 133 [463]; MEV 128). Although he sometimes writes as if certain acts amount to "throwing away" one's humanity, he repeatedly implies that a person's humanity remains, and so must be respected, even though he defiles, abases, violates, dishonors, or rejects it (DV 85 [422], 87 [424], 88 [425], 92 [428], 113 [463], 143 [471], 122 [454]; or MEV 83, 85, 86, 89, 128, 137, 118). With a confidence difficult to maintain in the present age, Kant

held that the spark of goodness, and therefore of rationality, is inextinguishable in us (R 41 [45]; L 197; DV 134 [463]; MEV 129).

II

Kant's formula, in effect, has two parts, namely: (1) Act in such a way that you never treat humanity simply as a means; and (2) act in such a way that you always treat humanity as an end. The first seems to have an instant intuitive appeal, but it cannot, I think, be understood independently of the second. To treat something *simply* as a means is to fail to treat it in some other appropriate way while one is treating it as a means. But 1, by itself, does not indicate what the appropriate treatment in question is. Obviously for Kant the answer is supplied by 2. One treats humanity simply as a means if and only if one treats it as a means but not as an end. The meaning of 1, then, depends upon the meaning of 2, and 1 will always be satisfied if 2 is satisfied.

Furthermore, 2 goes beyond 1. That is, the requirement to treat humanity as an end demands more than the requirement to avoid treating humanity merely as a means. This is suggested by the fact that Kant's discussion of the examples of the imperfect duties of developing one's talents and giving aid to the needy does not refer to the idea of using someone as a means (G 97–98 [430]). The point is confirmed in the *Metaphysics of Morals* when Kant says explicitly that being indifferent to someone satisfies the command not to use humanity merely as a means but fails to meet the requirement to treat humanity as an end (DV 55–56 [395]; MEV 54).

There are good reasons, then, to focus attention on 2 rather than 1. The crucial question is, What is it to treat humanity as an end? The question is especially puzzling because “humanity,” as a set of rational capacities and dispositions, is not the sort of thing which is an end, or goal, in the ordinary sense. Kant acknowledges this when he says that it is not an end to be pursued but a “self-existent” end. Everyone has humanity, and the moral imperative is not to produce more of it but something else. But what?

The natural temptation at this point is to ignore the text and supply intuitive answers. Kant uses “as an end” as a technical term for the appropriate additional ways to treat humanity when using it as a means. So we naturally fill in the gap as we feel it should be filled. The point, some say, is to take everyone's interests into account. Thus, for example, a person fails when he employs a servant at the lowest possible wage without regard for the servant's welfare. But taking the individual's interests *into account* may seem insufficient, for it often seems inappropriate to use a person, or his humanity, as a means to some larger social ends which might be thought to override the individual interest. The injunction not to use humanity merely as a means seems to condemn not just selfish disregard of others' interests but also utilitarian manipulation

of individuals for the general welfare. "I will not be used" is not always a defense against selfishness; it can also oppose abuse of the individual for altruistic purposes. In fact the charge "He is using me as a mere means, an object, a thing" often complains of neglect of one's unique qualities as an individual, as if the agent viewed one as expendable, replaceable by anyone who could serve similar functions.²

Whatever the merits of these intuitive reflections in general, they are no substitute, if the aim is to understand Kant, for examination of the puzzling details of Kant's texts. Let us review, then, what Kant says about *ends* in the sense in which humanity is regarded as an end.

1. Humanity is not a "relative end" but an "objective end" or an "end in itself" (G 95 [427–28]). Relative ends are ends which individuals have because they like, want, and hope for various things as sensuous beings. Objective ends, or ends in themselves, are ends "valid for all rational beings." Their value is contrasted with that of relative ends, which "provide no universal principles, no principles valid and necessary for all rational beings and also for every volition" (G 95 [427]). This does not tell us exactly in what sense humanity is an end, but it does imply that humanity is not an end because it is something desired and that its being an end implies principles which should be recognized by all rational beings.

2. An end, in general, is defined as "what serves the will as the (subjective) ground of its self-determination" (G 95 [427]). In the typical case this would be some future state of affairs for the sake of which one sets oneself to do something, for example, being financially secure as a goal for which a person might work and save. But humanity is not an end of this sort. In calling it an end, or "ground of self-determination," Kant evidently had in mind something more general, beyond the ordinary use of 'end,' namely, a reason for acting. That is, to acknowledge that something, such as humanity, is an end is to grant that one has a "ground" for choosing, or "determining oneself," to do or refrain from doing various things. But what, specifically, one has reason to do is not yet clear.

3. Humanity is a "self-existent" end, not an end to be produced (G 105 [438]). The point, apparently, is that whenever humanity exists it is an end by virtue of what it is and that to say that humanity is an end is not to say that something which does not yet exist should be produced or that the quantity of something desirable should be increased.

4. Humanity, as an objective end, is one "such that in its place one can put no other end to which (it) should serve simply as a means . . ." (G 96 [428]). Construing "ends" in the broad sense of "reasons for choosing," we may understand this as saying that when a person's

2. Note that Kant's view, as should be clear in what follows, is quite different from this; he urges us not to value a person's individuality but rather something which he has in common with others, his "humanity."

humanity gives one a reason for doing or refraining from something, whatever this may be, that reason takes precedence over other reasons; for example, even if neglecting, impairing, or dishonoring a person's humanity were to cause many people pleasure, this would not be a rational exchange.

5. Objective ends are "a supreme condition limiting the use of every means," "a condition limiting all merely relative and arbitrary ends," and "a limit on all arbitrary treatment" of rational beings (G 105 [438], 104 [436], 96 [428]). Thus the fact that humanity is an end in itself is supposed to set a rational and moral limit to the ways we may treat people in the pursuit of our relative ends, but just what this limit is remains to be seen.

6. Objective ends are to be "conceived only negatively—that is, as an end against which we should never act . . ." (G 105 [437]). This remark is puzzling. There is no problem if it is merely a reiteration of point 3 above, that to say that humanity, or a rational being, is an end in itself is not to name some goal to be achieved. However, if it means, as it seems to, that treating humanity as an end in itself requires only restraint, a "hands-off" attitude, rather than positive effort to help others, then it flatly contradicts what Kant says elsewhere, for example, that one must "agree positively" with humanity as an end in itself. "For the ends of a subject who is an end in himself must, if this conception is to have its full effect in me, be also, so far as possible, my ends" (G 98 [430]). At least at this point Kant is definite that, though humanity is not itself a goal to be achieved, the contention that it is an end in itself is meant to have the consequence that we ought to promote the ends of others.

7. In his second example Kant implies that one at least partially satisfies the requirement to treat humanity as an end if one treats persons as "beings who must themselves be able to share in the end of the very same action." A lying promise is wrong, for example, because "the man whom I seek to use for my own purposes by such a promise cannot possibly agree with my way of behaving to him, and so cannot himself share the end of the action" (G 97 [429]). This seems at first to imply that one should never do anything to a person that he does not want done, but Kant makes clear in a footnote that he does not intend such an absurdly extreme principle. Even the similar principle, 'Don't do unto others what you don't want done to yourself,' if unqualified, is said to be unacceptable because it gives the criminal a basis for disputing with the judge who (justly) punishes him (G 97 [430]).

It would be obviously absurd to say that one cannot use a person's services unless that person, quite literally, shared all of one's ends in doing so—for example, to say that carpenters employed to build an opera house must have among their goals the increased enjoyment of opera. The point is that, insofar as they are used as means, they must *be able* to adopt the agent's end, under some appropriate description,

without irrational conflict of will. If the carpenters are in need of work and are decently paid, they can without irrationality adopt the immediate end of building an opera house, whether they care for opera or not. Similarly, at least in Kant's opinion, the criminal can rationally—though he may not—adopt the ends of deterrence and even retribution for which he may be punished. What is relevant is not whether the person who is treated as a means happens to like the ends in question or could psychologically bring himself to value them all for their own sakes; it is rather that the maxim on which the agent acts ("Do this for the sake of that") is such that there is no irrationality in anyone's willing it as a universal law. The first formula of the Categorical Imperative asks us to test maxims from the agent's point of view; the second, insofar as the remarks about shared ends indicate, asks us to consider maxims from the point of view of those who are treated in accord with the maxims. But the main question is the same: Is the maxim one which any human being can, without irrational conflict of will, accept when applied to oneself and to everyone else?

Several considerations favor this interpretation. First, Kant was thinking of the "beings who must be able to share in the end" as rational beings, for he says: "For then it is manifest that a violator of the rights of man intends to use the person of others merely as a means without taking into consideration that, as rational beings, they ought always at the same time to be rated as ends—that is, only as beings who must themselves be able to share in the end of the very same action" (G 97 [430]).

Second, in the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant states as the condition of treating a person as an end that his autonomy as a rational being be subjected to no purpose unless it is in accord with a law that might arise from the will of the person affected (CPrR 90 [87]). Here the restriction on the purposes or ends to which a person may be subordinated is more explicitly the compatibility of such purposes with laws which the affected person, as a rational being, could accept. Third, the present reading helps to make understandable (though not entirely correct) Kant's belief that the first and second formulas of the Categorical Imperative are equivalent, at least for practical purposes (G 103 [436]). Fourth, the more literal alternative readings yield obviously absurd conclusions.

Although Kant's remarks about the ability to share ends do give a sense to his second formula, it would be a mistake, I think, to suppose that it represents his whole understanding of the matter—or even his most dominant line of thought. The remarks occur in a discussion of only one example, and they have little to do with his use of the idea of humanity as an end in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Moreover, the requirement that the recipient of an act must be able to share its end is subject to all the familiar, even notorious, problems that can be raised to the first formula of the Categorical Imperative. Until a maxim, including the

appropriate description of the end of an act, is specified, the test cannot be used; and, while there are no adequate rules for characterizing the maxim, how one does so makes all the difference in the results of the test. Moreover, it is difficult, if not impossible, to explain the sort of irrational conflict of will in question such that the test condemns just those maxims which morally should be condemned, and not others. For these reasons, I think, it is well to look further for clues regarding what it means to treat humanity as an end.

III

In describing a “kingdom of ends” Kant distinguishes (relative) personal ends from ends in themselves by saying that the latter have *dignity* whereas the former have only price (G 102 [434]). This idea, repeated in various ways elsewhere,³ may be a key to understanding the sense in which humanity is supposed to be an end in itself.

Dignity is attributed by Kant to things which are related but of different types: (1) humanity (rational nature, human nature—references at G 102 [435], 103 [436], 106 [436]; MEV 80 [420], 90 [429], 97 [435], 98 [436], 124 [459], 127 [462]); (2) morality (moral law—references at G 93 [425], 102 [435]; CP-R 152 [147]); (3) persons (rational beings—references at G 105 [436]; MEV 96–97 [433–34]); (4) persons who conform to duty (G 107 [439–40]; G 102 [434]); and (5) moral disposition (to do duty for duty’s sake—reference at G 103 [435]). The attribution of dignity to dutiful persons (4) and moral disposition (5) might suggest that one acquires dignity only by conforming to moral law and so that only morally good people have dignity. But other passages make clear that humanity in each person has dignity, no matter how immoral the person may be (DV 99 [435]; MEV 97; L 196–97; DV 45 [387]). Autonomy is said to be the ground of dignity, and this is a property of the will of every rational being, namely, the property of legislating to oneself universal (moral) laws without the sensuous motives of fear, hope for reward, and the like (G 103 [436], 108 [440]). Dignity is repeatedly ascribed to “every rational being” and “rational nature” (G 103 [436], 105 [438], 106 [439]). As far as human beings are concerned, this amounts to saying that humanity in persons has dignity; and, as we have seen, Kant does not think that one loses one’s humanity when one acts immorally.

Dignity is characterized as “an unconditional and incomparable worth” (G 103 [436]). The first point, that dignity is an unconditioned worth, is that it is a value not dependent upon contingent facts. Thus, for example, whatever has dignity has value independently of any effects, profit, or advantage which it might produce. In Kant’s terms, it has value

3. For example, MEV 97 (434), 127 (462). In the first passage Kant explicitly identifies being an end in itself and having dignity.

regardless of any *market price* which it may have, that is, regardless of what one could get from others in exchange for it on account of its ability to satisfy universal needs and inclinations. Its value is also independent of *fancy price*, that is, independent of what one could get in exchange for it on account of someone's happening to want it quite apart from its utility in satisfying universal human needs and inclinations (G 102 [434–35]). What has dignity has value whether in fact valued by anyone or not. Thus when Kant speaks of dignity as an "intrinsic value" he does not imply that, as a matter of fact, people value what has dignity for its own sake. The point is rather that a perfectly rational person would so value it.

The second point, not entailed by the first, is that dignity is an "incomparable" worth, "exalted above all price," and "admits of no equivalent" (G 102 [434–35]). This means at least that whenever one must choose between something with dignity and something with mere price one should always choose the former. No amount of price, or value dependent on contingent needs and tastes, can justify or compensate for sacrifice of dignity. We may express this by saying that what has dignity is *priceless*.

While it is clear that Kant thought that dignity should always take precedence over price, it is not so obvious whether he took a more extreme position. That is, did he hold that what has dignity is *irreplaceable* in the sense that there are no legitimate trade-offs among things which have dignity? Is his view, for example, that there are two scales of value, price and dignity, such that things can be ranked comparatively on each scale even though nothing on the scale of dignity can be overweighed by any amount of value on the scale of price? This would allow that some things may have more dignity than others, and that the sacrifice of dignity in one sphere might be justified by its enhancement in another. This is compatible with the claim that dignity is above all price. Or, alternatively, is Kant's view that dignity is something that cannot be quantified, so that it does not make sense to say that dignity of humanity in one person can fairly and reasonably be exchanged for the sake of a greater amount of dignity elsewhere? On this view to say that something has dignity is to say that it can never be sacrificed for anything with mere price, but it tells us nothing about what to do if one must choose between dignity in one sphere and dignity in another.

The first interpretation may well be more congenial to most readers because it obviously allows the sacrifice of humanity in one person for the sake of humanity in many persons in extreme circumstances. One can imagine a spy story, for example, in which suicide, the use of brain-damaging drugs, and contemptuous mockery of another human being, all of which Kant regards contrary to the dignity of humanity, are necessary means to the prevention of a holocaust. In such a case, admittedly rare, many people would readily grant that it is justified to

sacrifice the humanity of one person for the preservation of life, prevention of misery, and even furtherance of rationality in many persons. The second interpretation, however, seems to be implied by what Kant says. The definition of *price* is that "something else can be put in its place as an equivalent," and *dignity*, by contrast, "admits of no equivalent." Strictly construed, this must mean that what has dignity cannot morally or reasonably be exchanged for anything of greater value, whether the value is dignity or price. One cannot, then, trade off the dignity of humanity in one person in order to honor a greater dignity in two, ten, or a thousand persons. This may seem to imply that there can never be a justification for impairing the rationality or sacrificing the life of any human being, but this is not necessarily so. What is implied, strictly, is only that one may not sacrifice something with dignity *in exchange* for something of greater value. Thus, if the sacrifice of something with dignity is ever justified, the ground for this cannot be "this is worth more than that" or "a greater quantity of value is produced by doing so." Kant in fact takes a quite rigoristic stand regarding acts contrary to the dignity of humanity in a single person; for example, suicide, drunkenness, and mockery are said to be violations of "perfect," that is, exceptionless, duties. To say that one should never, for any reason, damage the rational capacities of any person would probably not come hard for one who held that it is wrong to tell a lie to save a friend from murder. However, the thesis that humanity has an incomparable worth which "admits of no equivalent" does not, strictly speaking, commit Kant to such a view. One cannot trade off a person's rational capacities for anything alleged to be more valuable, but comparisons of quantities of value may not be the only justifications. When we turn to Kant's more specific moral opinions, especially regarding the preservation of human life, we find that Kant sometimes even demands the destruction of a person with humanity of incomparable worth.

IV

What are the practical implications of the thesis that humanity in persons has an unconditional and incomparable worth? Since humanity is our rationality and capacity to set ends, it seems natural to suppose that one would acknowledge its special value in the following ways. First, and most obviously, one would refuse to do anything which damages or impairs a person's rational capacities, whether the person is oneself or another. For example, drugs or frontal lobotomies that render a criminal nonviolent at the cost of making him permanently cowlike would be forbidden. Even temporary impairment of reason through drugs, at least in one who had a viable alternative to use reason, would be suspect. Second, one who sufficiently valued persons' rational capacities would presumably not want to destroy the persons themselves. Thus killing human beings seems to be ruled out. Third, if rational capacities

have an incomparable value, then surely one should try to develop them and improve them in oneself and others. Fourth, it seems equally obvious that one should strive to exercise these capacities as far as possible. Thus if, as Kant thought, acting from respect for the moral law is a use of reason, then one should try to do so. And, more surprisingly, even prudence is required so far as it is compatible with unconditional rational principles of morality. Fifth, since the exercise of rationality is something to be cherished, in trying to influence others one should appeal to their reason rather than try to manipulate them by nonrational techniques. Sixth, valuing highly the setting and rational pursuit of ends even in other persons, one should leave them freedom to set and pursue their ends in a rational (moral and prudential) way, subject only to whatever further constraints reason imposes. Finally, certain attitudes and symbolic gestures, and avoidance of others, may be required. If humanity is of incomparable value, it should be honored and respected or at least not mocked, dishonored, or degraded. This is especially suggested by the term dignity (*Würde*), which is Kant's label for this special value.

Kant's own use of the idea of humanity as an end is for the most part in line with these natural applications, and at least some of the discrepancies can be explained as a result of certain special beliefs he held. Let us consider Kant's view on each point in turn.

1. Kant does not discuss lobotomy and other means of causing permanent brain damage, but he does condemn drunkenness and the use of opium as making one temporarily animal-like, with a weakened "capacity to use his powers purposively" (MEV 88 [427]). Even gluttony is prohibited because it leaves one "temporarily incapacitated for activities which require adroitness and deliberation in the use of one's powers" (MEV 88 [427]). The principle behind these conclusions, as well as the requirement to develop one's natural talents, is: "it is one's duty to raise himself out of the crudity of his nature, out of his animality . . . more and more to humanity, by which alone he is capable of setting himself ends (MEV 44–45 [387]).

2. In both the *Groundwork* and the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant argues that suicide is wrong because it reflects an undervaluation of humanity in one's own person. He does not, however, draw the general conclusion that killing human beings is always wrong. Execution for murder is said to be a requirement of justice, and killing in a just war is regarded permissible at least in certain stages of history (MEJ 102 [333], 122–23 [349]). Thus if Kant was consistent, he understood the incomparable value of humanity in persons in a sense that does not imply that the life of every person with humanity must always be preserved. In fact the argument against suicide does not imply that *life* is irreplaceable. What is at issue is suicide for the purpose of ending a painful existence or "as a mere means to some end of one's own liking," and this is said to be

wrong not because it destroys something priceless and irreplaceable but because it “degrades” humanity in one’s own person. That is, suicide for such reasons reflects an attitude that devalues humanity (G 97 [429], 89 [421–22]; MEV 84 [423]) and counts lesser things as more important. Although suicide contravenes a “perfect duty,” still Kant leaves open “casuistic questions,” for example, whether it is wrong to kill oneself in anticipation of an unjust death sentence, or in order to save one’s country, or to escape an impending madness resulting from the bite of a rabid dog (MEV 84–85 [423–24]).

Kant’s view, I think, may be best reconstructed as follows. First, to take the life of someone with humanity for the sake of something of mere price is always wrong, an undervaluation of humanity. Pleasure and pain, and the particular goals one has because of what one desires to achieve, are thought to have only conditioned value, or price, and so suicide or the killing of others for the sake of increasing pleasure, diminishing pain, or achieving any contingently desired goal is wrong. Second, the proper attitude about humanity is not that each bit of it has a value which one can weigh against the value of other bits to calculate reasonable trade-offs. One should not try to determine what to do by calculating whether destroying or degrading humanity in one case is warranted by its consequences of preserving or developing it in another. But nevertheless, third, the fact that such calculation is inappropriate does not imply that there is no reason, ever, for ending the life of a being with humanity. Analogously, perhaps, a parent of three children faced with the awful choice of saving two or one might on some ground choose to save the two without having to grant that two are *worth* more than one, that the reason is that the quantity of something valuable in the world has been maximized. What the ground could be would need to be explained by other formulas of the Categorical Imperative, despite Kant’s (mistaken) belief that the formulas are equivalent; but I expect that the intuition here is not uncommon.

3. As we would expect, Kant argues for a duty to develop one’s rational capacities, “powers of the spirit” (e.g., in mathematics, logic, and metaphysics of nature) and “powers of the mind” (e.g., memory, imagination, and the like), and again the general ground seems to be “the worth of humanity in his own person, which he should not degrade” (MEV 109–10 [445–46]). The duty is regarded as an “imperfect” one, but the point is not that one may choose to neglect these powers but only that the principle in question does not specify “the kind and degree” of action needed to satisfy it. Kant does not, however, conclude that it is a duty to develop the rational powers of others. The reason is not that the development of their perfection is unimportant or less important but rather that, in Kant’s opinion, such development can only be achieved by the person himself (MEV 44 [386]). As the old quip has it, “you can lead a youth to college, but you can’t make him think.” The idea that one

should at least help to provide opportunity for others' rational development is not discussed, though in his own life Kant was obviously committed to it.

4. To strive to exercise reason in moral contexts, Kant implies, is a duty, but to use it to promote one's own happiness, barring special circumstances, is not a duty. Kant says that it is a duty to strive for moral perfection, which consists of a disposition to do one's duty from a sense of duty, which in turn is supposed to be a disposition to act from pure reason as opposed to sensuous inclination (MEV 110 [446]). Despite the incomparable value of rationality, however, Kant does not conclude that the exercise of prudential reason in normal contexts is a duty (even when compatible with other moral principles). The explanation is not that such use of reason is unimportant or that the idea of humanity as an incomparable value fails to commend it; it is rather that human beings are so disposed by nature to pursue their own happiness that it is inappropriate to speak of a "duty" to do so. "Duty" implies constraint, possible disinclination and failure to comply (MEV 43 [385–86]). Thus, though rational prudence is not demeaned, the only *duty* to promote one's own happiness is indirect and concerns special circumstances; that is, the duty, strictly speaking, is to avoid unnecessary pain, adversity, and poverty insofar as these are temptations to vice rather than a general duty to maximize one's (morally permissible) satisfactions (MEV 46 [388]).

5. The idea that one should try to reason with others rather than to manipulate them by nonrational techniques is manifest in Kant's discussion of the duty to respect others. No matter how stupid a person may appear, it is wrong to censure him "under the name of absurdity, inept judgment, and the like," and no matter how immoral he may seem, one must not treat him as worthless or incapable of improvement (MEV 128 [463–64]). Moral education—as illustrated in Kant's sample moral catechism—is to be by a rational process of question and answer, never by citing examples to emulate (MEV 145–53 [477–84]).

6. One of the most significant consequences of placing a special value on a human being's capacity to set and rationally pursue ends is that there is a strong *prima facie* case for allowing individuals freedom to form and pursue their own life plans subject only to the constraint that others be allowed a similar freedom. This is essentially Kant's "universal principle of justice," the foundation of his treatment of rights and juridical duties (MEJ 35 [230–31]). Even in the private sphere the duty of respect for persons is one which requires us to reject arrogance and make room for others; in contrast with beneficence, it is a negative duty and requires that even friends "halt at a suitable distance from one another" (MEV 113–14 [449–50], 130 [464–65], 136 [470]). Thus not only must we allow others "external" freedom but we should also leave even the best of friends a certain private space. We should value not only

their happiness but that they set their own ends and pursue them in a rational way.

Valuing someone's rational pursuit of his own ends is not the same as wanting him to have what he desires, or what he will most enjoy, by any (morally permissible) means. The latter is general beneficence, and it is noteworthy that in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant's argument for general beneficence has nothing to do with the dignity of humanity (MEV 116–18 [450–54]). Indeed it is hard to see how such a duty would follow from the principle to treat humanity as an end, despite Kant's remark in the *Groundwork* that to accept fully humanity in others as an end one must regard their ends as one's own. If one could paternalistically give another pleasure and diminish his pain by ignoring his own life plan and thwarting his own rational pursuit of his ends, then this would be placing something with mere price (e.g., his comfort) over something with dignity (his capacity to set and rationally pursue ends). If our interpretation is right, what the dignity of humanity should require is that one should help others to set their own ends and rationally pursue them rather than try to make their lives pleasant independently of their own goals. This might well involve removing obstacles, providing opportunities, and all manner of "positive" activity distinct from a passive "hands-off" attitude. In fact Kant's example of beneficence in the *Groundwork* really has to do with helping someone in need rather than with general beneficence, and one is urged to be concerned with his ends, not with what one believes will make him best off (G 90 [423], 98 [430]; MEV 46 [388]). In respecting the dignity of humanity in a person, one is to value another's achievement of a (morally permissible) end because it is an end *he* adopted rather than because one expects it will bring him pleasure or something regarded as intrinsically valuable apart from his choice.

7. Kant's arguments in the *Metaphysics of Morals* also accord with the final natural application of the idea of the dignity of humanity in persons, namely, that human rationality is to be honored in word and gesture as well as in deed. Kant is unusual, at least compared to moral philosophers today, in stressing the moral importance of attitude and gesture aside from their consequences. Mockery is opposed, whether or not it is effective for the purpose of reform or deterrent, because it reflects a disrespectful attitude toward the humanity of others (MEV 132 [467]). Servility, as often revealed in groveling, flattery, simpering, and self-disparagement, is condemned because it symbolizes an attitude which does not place the dignity of one's own humanity above all price (MEV 96–98 [434–36]).

V

My purpose has not been to defend Kant but to understand him. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, if my account is more or less

correct, certain objections to Kant's formula regarding humanity as an end turn out to be off the mark. For example, it is sometimes said that this formula is "empty," having no implications independently of other formulations of the Categorical Imperative.⁴ Although fine questions about the relations among the formulations must await proper interpretation of each, my reconstruction of Kant's second formulation certainly appears to be independent of others and, in fact, to go beyond the famous first formula, as the usual interpretations would have it, in declaring a rather substantive value judgment with significant practical implications. Another objection that has been raised to the second formula is that it prohibits what is impossible, namely, treating oneself merely as a means.⁵ On the present account, however, a person can, and too often does, treat humanity in his person merely as a means; for this means, among other things, being willing to trade or sacrifice his rational capacities for something of value merely because he happens to want it. Again, it has been objected that Kant's formula prohibits noble self-sacrifice for the improvement of the human condition as, for example, when a medical researcher undergoes dangerous experiments in hopes of finding a cure for a disease that kills hundreds of thousands.⁶ As I understand Kant, however, such self-sacrifice is not necessarily wrong. The second formula condemns sacrifice of life for what has mere price (for example, money, fame, and even cessation of pain) and, more controversially, it forbids quantitative calculation of value among things with dignity, but it does not unequivocally prohibit the sacrifice of one's life. Another objection has been that Kant's principle leads to irreconcilable moral dilemmas, as when a typhoid carrier who has done no wrong must be quarantined for the safety of many other people.⁷ Treating the individual as an end, it has been alleged, is incompatible with treating other people as ends. Possible conflicts of duties may remain a problem, but the situation in question is not a definitive example. Liberty is a high priority according to the second formula, but it is limited by a concern for the liberty and rational development of all. It should not be curtailed for the sake of anything of minor value or even the highest value by the measure of price, but that does not entail that there is never a reason to limit it.

A more serious worry about Kant's formula is that it places a comparatively higher value on rational capacity, development, control, and honor than most morally conscientious and reasonable people are prepared to grant. Kant has arguments for his view, which I have not

4. See, for example, M. G. Singer, *Generalization in Ethics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1961), p. 235.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

6. C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1930), p. 132.

7. *Ibid.*

considered; and common opinion is hardly decisive. Nevertheless, the striking implications of Kant's view, as I understand it, should not be ignored and his rationale deserves critical scrutiny. Hedonistic utilitarians surely must recoil; for Kant's view implies that pleasure and the alleviation of pain, even gross misery, have mere price, never to be placed above the value of rationality in persons. Kant apparently had faith that unequivocal commitment to this ranking of values would lead, in some indescribable world, to the deserved happiness of every conscientious person; but those of us who do not believe this must question his ranking, however strong its intuitive appeal in particular cases.