

THE ‘NEW KANT’ ON THE FUNDAMENTAL VALUE OF RATIONAL NATURE*

Le «Nouveau Kant» sur la valeur fondamentale de la nature rationnelle

Sunday Adeniyi Fasoro

Technical University of Berlin
adeniyi.fasoro@win.tu-berlin.de

Abstract: This article examines the ‘New Kant’ claims that the fundamental value of rational nature rather than morally worthy action is the source of human dignity. The ‘New Kant’ argues that all persons have a dignity that must be respected unconditionally in virtue of the capacity to set ends or act for a reason, regardless of whether they disrespect humanity in their own person. It is believed that the ends of human beings cannot be given but are adopted because they have the power to legislate and to set unconditioned ends for themselves through the principle of willing. This article evaluates three popular theses of the ‘New Kant’: first, that dignity and respect-worthiness are independent of morality; second, that the moral duty to respect people is, on the one hand, the reason why we must respect others because dignity is a normative concept, and on the other hand, incompatible with the demand to always act on moral principles because dignity is possessed prior to morality; and third, that there is a moral command to always respect others, but not oneself.

Keywords: rational nature; value; humanity; dignity; respect; moral worth; autonomy.

Résumé: Cet article examine le « Nouveau Kant » prétend que la valeur fondamentale de la nature rationnelle plutôt que l'action moralement digne est la source de la dignité humaine. Le « Nouveau Kant » fait valoir que toutes les personnes ont une dignité qui doit être respectée sans condition en vertu de la capacité de fixer des fins ou d'agir pour une raison, qu'ils ne respectent pas l'humanité dans leur propre personne. On croit que les extrémités des êtres humains ne peuvent être données, mais qu'elles sont adoptées parce qu'elles ont le pouvoir de légiférer et de se fixer des fins non conditionnées par le principe de la volonté. Cet article évalue trois thèses populaires du «New Kant»: Premièrement, la dignité et le respect sont indépendants de la moralité; Deuxièmement, que le devoir moral de respecter les gens est, d'une part, la raison pour laquelle nous devons respecter les autres parce que la dignité est un concept normatif, et d'autre part, incompatible avec la demande d'agir toujours sur des principes moraux parce que la dignité est possédée avant moralité et Troisièmement, qu'il y a un commandement moral de toujours respecter les autres, mais pas soi-même.

Mots-clés: nature rationnelle; valeur; l'humanité ; dignité; respect; valeur morale; autonomie.

Introduction

Many philosophers have criticised Kant for his excessive moralistic demand on a true moral being. His dictum that only action performed from duty has moral worth has been termed repugnant. Since Schillerian rigorism and the Hegelian formalism

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objections, many contemporary thinkers have indicated the need for the “New Kant”¹. The “New Kant” is an exposition of Kant’s practical philosophy that sees a true moral being as someone who is permitted to have morally right desires and act accordingly, without following either duty or the way that we morally “ought” to do it. This New Kantian way is more concerned about alleviating the suffering of finite rational beings, committing ethics to an absolute notion of personhood, and the unconditional value of human dignity so that free rational agents can be oriented towards having a practical respect for rationality. The New Kantian sees a morally ideal person as someone who is firmly attached to moral ends but does not consider himself under any moral constraints derived by those ends. But can we have an ideal, morally perfect person without having regard for the moral law?

Kant’s proposition that “rational nature exists as an end in itself” (*GMS* 4:429)², and as “an absolute value” (*GMS* 4:428) is the foundational basis for the ‘New Kant’. The value of rational nature is now termed a fundamental value. This fundamental value is considered a central component of Kant’s critical system, particularly as the grounds of the categorical imperative. It is also considered to be the source of Kant’s conception of the dignity of man and his exposition of why persons are respect-worthy, rather than having a good will or acting from duty. In this paper, I evaluate the arguments of the

¹ To my knowledge, this term was first used by Robert Pippin to refer to a group of commentators within Kantian scholarship, which comprises Barbara Herman, Christine Korsgaard, Allen Wood and Thomas Hill. See, Robert B. Pippin, “Rigorism and the ‘New Kant,’” in *Kant Und Die Berliner Aufklärung (Akten Des IX. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses)*, ed. Volker Gerhardt, Rolf-Peter Horstmann, and Ralph Schumacher, vol. I (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), 313–14.

² References to Kant’s works, are cited by the volume and page numbers of the German Academy edition: *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*. All translations are taken from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, Cambridge University Press, with the exception of *Lectures on Natural Law Feyerabend*, taken from Lars Vinx’ translation (2003). This paper has used the following abbreviations for Kant’s works:

Collins *Moralphilosophie Collins (Lectures on Ethics Collins)*

GMS *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten (Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals)*

GSE *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen (Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime)*

MS *Die Metaphysik der Sitten (The Metaphysics of Morals)*

NF *Kants Naturrecht Feyerabend (Lectures on Natural Law Feyerabend)*

Citations from Kant’s texts are taken from the following books: Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, ed. Peter Heath and J. B. Schneewind, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor and Christine M. Korsgaard, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*, ed. Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Natural Law Feyerabend*, trans. Lars Vinx (unpublished, 2003).

‘New Kant’ in light of what constitutes human dignity and a justification for how to treat persons.

I establish just what “rational nature” means as a “fundamental value”, and then look at “rational nature as an end in itself” by looking at dignity as a normative concept. To this end, I focus on Barbara Herman’s arguments for the value of rational nature and Paul Guyer’s response to her, as well as Heiner Klemme’s defence of “rational nature as an end in itself”. Then, I explain on what basis a concept can be considered to be normative, according to Kant.

Rational Nature as a Fundamental Value

Barbara Herman argues in her famous book, *The Practice of Moral Judgement* (1993), that Kant is widely regarded as a deontologist with an inflexible attitude towards moral deliberations who makes strict moral judgements. To the contrary, she provides a Kantian account of moral deliberation, whereby someone in real-life circumstances with particular motives can determine whether a proposed action or end is permissible³. Moral deliberation allows for a moral judgement that is very sensitive to the everyday life situations of the individual agent. With this, the categorical imperative procedure could no longer be viewed as “the sole principle of maxim and action assessment or providing a method for the moral assessment of maxims” by which an individual agent would judge whether his own maxim is permissible⁴. Instead, moral judgement should proceed from moral deliberation “on the content of a maxim”. Here, Herman is simply arguing that maxims should not be conceived as only having explicit moral content as they also have implicit moral content⁵.

There lies the distinction that she has made between moral deliberation and moral judgement. Before looking at the distinction, it is better to clarify what she meant by explicit and implicit moral content. As a moral agent, I have an implicit moral content if my willing is committed to a moral standard for my action, and an explicit moral content if my moral judgement proceeds directly from a maxim formulation that is explicitly a moral constraint in the pursuit of my end (for “maxim should include all

³ Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 133.

⁴ Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 112,143.

⁵ Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 145.

of the aspects that determine choice-worthiness in his actions and ends”)⁶. Although implicit moral content is a “rare part of proffered action description” or in “circumstances of variance coming from hard cases”. Moral deliberation is needed in difficult cases where a rational being thinks he has a reason for his action that may rebut the inference that is provided by the judgement. (This could be best described as the ends justifying the means or “routine means”, as she calls it.) Such inference, however, can be rebutted “only if its justificatory basis is something other than self-interest”⁷. (For example, if I perform a deceitful action to help a friend out of poverty and if it is done not out of concern for my own self-interest and not a routine means, my deception might be justified in moral deliberation.)

Her emphasis on moral deliberation was based on the argument that Kant’s ethics have been misconstrued as being squarely deontological, leaving no room for sympathy and emotion. In her paper, *Leaving Deontology Behind*, Herman argues that Kant’s ethics actually appeal to a fundamental conception of value. She argues that in the *Groundwork I*, Kant began contemplating the principle of morality by first considering the fundamental value of the good will. Herman claims that the popular objection of formalism and rigorism against Kant both proceed from the fact that many commentators do not see the degree of importance that Kant places on the fundamental value of rational nature. She argues that in virtue of treating rational nature as a value, Kant was able to explain and justify the demand that morality has on our lives. Herman begins her analysis of Kant’s conception of value by differentiating it from traditional conceptions of value, and states that he bases his own conception on the unconditionally good, independent of desires and inclinations.

She asserts that the value of rational nature is regulative, stating that “the categorical imperative is the regulative moral principle to which maxims of actions and norm of our interest are to conform”⁸. The principles of pure reason, however, constitute a final end because rational nature must be regarded as the capacity to act for a reason, and if a man is so conceived, his end cannot be given but adopted, as the will’s activity to adopt an end is an expression of the capacity to act for a reason. Then, if we admit that rational nature is constitutive of pure reason in the strongest sense, it must be

⁶ Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 145, 221-2.

⁷ Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 149.

⁸ Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 43, 149.

because it exists as “a value of a special magnitude or kind”⁹. Therefore, “rational nature is the regulative and unconditioned end of willing, for it is the condition of its own goodness, goodness independent of any further end”¹⁰.

Herman, therefore, asserts that in virtue of rational willing alone, a man possesses a fundamental value, that is, a dignity. It is on this account that Kant’s moral and political philosophy is associated with a fundamental conception of value. She argues that in the *Groundwork*, Kant introduces “the idea of rational nature as an end in itself because the moral law cannot be the final determining ground of a will unless it provides the will with an end that is a noncontingent condition of choice-worthiness or goodness, that is, a final end”¹¹. Herman’s argument could be read thus: Kant claims “rational nature exists as an end in itself” (*GMS* 4:428) because “the principle of humanity and of every rational being in general as an end in itself is the ultimate limiting condition of all subjective ends” (*GMS* 4:430-1). The moral law does not exist, but rational nature does, as a fundamental value and the ultimate determining ground of “the wrong- or right-making characteristics of action that renders moral requirements intelligible in a way that is able to guide deliberation”¹². This implies that Kant should be interpreted as saying that rational nature is itself a fundamental value, and thus, we need not search elsewhere for the grounding of practical reason and of morality.

This fundamental value, she said, must be the dignity that all persons possess equally in virtue of the capacity for practical rationality. Quoting from the *Groundwork*, Herman claims that “rational nature is morality and dignity, insofar it is capable of morality” (*GMS* 4:435). She went on to claim that Kant places a special value on rational nature in order to defeat heteronomy of the will (by this, she means that rational nature “contains its own principle of determining moral actions”)¹³. The possibility of rational nature being an ‘end in itself’ rests on the fact that a rational being has an autonomous will. That is, the capacity to reason for oneself. Since the possibility of rational nature determining moral action depends on the self-given principle of the categorical imperative, autonomy is therefore the capacity to act morally¹⁴. Here,

⁹ Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 237.

¹⁰ Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 238.

¹¹ Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 228.

¹² Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 216.

¹³ Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 238.

¹⁴ Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 238.

Herman is claiming that practical reason is the determining ground of the good will and as such, dignity and morality depend not on the effects of action, but our rational nature.

She argues that the condition for a rational being to possess dignity and to be respect-worthy is totally independent of morally worthy action. Since it is only in virtue of rational nature that an agent has dignity, his dignity is possessed prior to the moral law and is, in turn, opposed to the moral task of attaining complete adequacy to the moral law. It follows that human dignity does not depend on acquiring a good will or performing a morally worthy action; rather, it depends merely on acting for a reason.

Herman argues that it is incorrect to regard the good will merely as unconditioned goodness and, in turn, the unconditional value that every rational being can realise if he acts solely from duty alone. Rather, she points out that there is a difference between unconditional and conditional goodness, which directly points to the evaluative distinction between acting from duty and acting from other motives. She illustrated her argument with an example of conditional goodness (although some of it might be unjust) that is morally good in which someone acts from sympathy or deception to help a friend (I will turn to this shortly, below). Her bottom line argument rests on the fact that the fundamental value of a rational being is nonscalar¹⁵. Her argument is that Kantian morality does not prescribe a preference to act in such a way that it can have moral worth (acting from duty) or acting in a way that it cannot have moral worth (acting from sympathy); rather, his principle of morality should be read thus: “as the final end of rational willing, rational nature as value is both absolute and nonscalar”¹⁶.

She claimed that, for Kant, the good will is nothing but our rational nature, which is an end in itself and contains the condition of its own goodness. As she put it, “the goodness of the goodwill resides in the principle of its willing, not in any special efforts or virtues that allow it to make the principle of good willing the principle of all its maxims”¹⁷. Herman’s assertion is that “efforts and virtues have value as means” (this view is also held by Guyer, Wood, and Reath)¹⁸. It follows that having a good will does

¹⁵ Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 238.

¹⁶ Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 238.

¹⁷ Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 138.

¹⁸ Paul Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1; Andrews Reath, “Value and Law in Kant’s Moral Theory,” *Ethics* 114, no. 1 (2003): 127; Allen W. Wood, *Kantian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 88.

not give anyone a greater value than someone with an ordinary will (in any case, with her presumption, there would only be equally possessed good will); and that no one has a greater degree of dignity than the other. This is because dignity is not a property dependent on “either virtue or moral worth”. Its fundamental value is absolute because it is the source of all relative value or goodness. It is nonscalar because its value is equal and not the highest in comparison with the value of all other rational beings, and is not dependent on anything else. Herman, therefore, concludes that human dignity involves “casuistical principles” because it is not possible to scale the fundamental value of rational nature as it is an end in itself and the final source of reasons.

Herman is not the only Kantian scholar to have argued for moral deliberation against the excessive moralistic demand of the categorical imperative. Thomas Hill, like Herman, has called for a revision of Kant’s thesis about the special value of a good will. In the *Groundwork I*, Kant makes a declaration that “it is not possible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will” (*GMS* 4:393). In the passage just quoted, Hill interprets Kant as saying “our decisions should not be dominated by self-righteous concern for our own moral purity, but rather that we should not pursue any goods by means that we recognise to be morally wrong”¹⁹. By this, Hill means a practical principle that is action-guiding when it is supported by the categorical imperative, or as he puts it, “a practical principle [that] intends to guild deliberative choice, or at least provide the first step toward finding a choice-guiding principle”²⁰. A choice-guiding principle for Hill is one principle that may serve ‘to determine one’s will’ or ‘prescribe how one ought to choose to act’, in contrast to a principle of moral assessment that is based on praiseworthiness and blameworthiness.

Herman’s account has, however, been criticised for regarding rational nature as the source of fundamental value, rather than freedom. As Paul Guyer observed, there are two important questions to ask about Herman’s reading of Kant on the fundamental value of rational nature. In his observation, Guyer pointed out that Kant’s ultimate ground of value is freedom rather than rational nature and posed two important questions on whether Kant regards our rational nature as the grounds of morality and

¹⁹ Thomas E. Jr. Hill, *Human Welfare and Moral Worth: Kantian Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.

²⁰ Hill, *Human Welfare and Moral Worth: Kantian Perspectives*, 39.

dignity. First, he asked whether there is a distinction between what Kant, at times, depicts as “freedom” and its value, and what Herman refers to as “rational agency” and its value? Second, he asked if there is any distinction between claiming that there is an absolute value which grounds moral value and claiming that the absolute value itself is freedom rather than the rational agency?²¹ In my view, Guyer is correct that Kant emphasises the self-restricted use of freedom rather than the agency. Guyer referenced Collins’ notes on *Kant’s Lectures on Practical Philosophy and Baumgarten (1784–5)*, where Kant says:

Freedom is the capacity which confers unlimited usefulness on all the others. It is the highest degree of life. It is the property that is a necessary condition underlying all perfections. All animals have the capacity to use their powers according to choice. Yet this choice is not free but necessitated by incentives and *stimuli*. Their actions contain *bruta necessitas*. If all creatures had such a choice, tied to sensory drives, the world would have no value. But the inner worth of the world, the *summum bonum*, is freedom according to a choice that is not necessitated to act. Freedom is thus the inner worth of the world. (*Collins 27:344*).

Here, Kant seems to affirm that the use of freedom is to potentially bring value to the world. In his interpretation of the passage, Guyer thinks that though freedom is established as the source of fundamental value, at this point Kant is yet to draw a distinction between freedom and reason because, as an agency, “we have to set maxims for ourselves and restrict our freedom through principles we have legislated for ourselves” (*Collins 27:345*). I think Guyer is right because freedom is elusive without reason. But Herman again seems to be correct too and is consistent with Kant in stating that rational nature (if she assumes that freedom is in the background) is the most valuable thing in the world (and if it is true that there is no fundamental difference between the two terms).

To clarify this further, Guyer again cites Kant’s *Naturrecht Feyerabend* lectures of 1784. There, Kant pointed out very clearly that: “While only [rational] beings can be ends in themselves, they can be ends in themselves not because they have [the capacity to reason], but because they have [the capacity to use freedom]. Their [capacity to]

²¹ Paul Guyer, “The Value of Agency: The Practice of Moral Judgment by Barbara Herman,” *Ethics* 106, no. 2 (1996): 420.

reason is only a means” (*NF* 27:1321). This passage shows that Kant seems to think that freedom itself is the determining ground of the fundamental value, but it needs the coordination of the rational agency for self-regulation to take place through principles that are dictated by the use of reason. As a follow-up to this, Guyer submits that rational nature is nothing but the means to preserve and promote our freedom, which is itself the fundamental value²². Guyer could be read as saying that our rational nature is extrinsic, but nonetheless indispensable, in relation to freedom itself, which is intrinsic. Since freedom cannot be realised without the use of reason and reason is a mere exercise of freedom, then there is no fundamental difference between them, and if there is any, it is “merely verbal”²³.

Guyer agrees with Herman that human dignity is based on a fundamental value of rational beings, which is prior to the moral law. He posits that this is the very reason why Kant says that every person must be treated as an end and never merely as a means. In supporting his earlier stated argument about freedom, Guyer asserts that “all human beings must be treated as ends in themselves, the sheer fact of adherence to universal law is not an end in itself but is rather the means to the realization of the human potential for autonomy or freedom in both choice and action”²⁴. Two things are embedded in these texts. First, that dignity is possessed, regardless of the moral worthiness or unworthiness of the bearer’s actions. Second, that it is only through laws that a rational agent has freely given to himself can he realise, preserve and promote the fundamental value of freedom. Both of them are the products of freedom itself. And Kant says in the *Groundwork*, “But the law-giving itself, which determines all worth, must for that very reason have dignity, that is, an unconditional, incomparable worth... Autonomy is, therefore, the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature” (*GMS* 4:436).

The value, by implication, provides the end of the actions that are to be pursued and serves as the foundation of the authority of the moral rules. The fundamental value

²² Guyer, “The Value of Agency: The Practice of Moral Judgment by Barbara Herman,” 421; Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness*, 57. See also, Reath, “Value and Law in Kant’s Moral Theory,” 127. See also, Heiner F. Klemme, “„die Vernünftige Natur Existirt Als Zweck an Sich Selbst.“,” *Kant-Studien* 106, no. 1 (2015): 95.

²³ Guyer, “The Value of Agency: The Practice of Moral Judgment by Barbara Herman,” 421; Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness*, 57. See also, Reath, “Value and Law in Kant’s Moral Theory,” 127. See also, Klemme, “„die Vernünftige Natur Existirt Als Zweck an Sich Selbst.“,” 95.

²⁴ Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness*, 1.

depends on nothing else. It does not require conformity with the moral law, as conformity merely serves as a means to “preserve, enhance, and realise autonomy, but it is a requirement because of its connection to the prior value of freedom”²⁵ (this prior value, I suppose, is the practical reason). Freedom is the ultimate value and the moral law is merely formulated as a means for our freedom to be valuable²⁶. So, acting according to the moral law has no inner value in itself. It follows that it is ill-conceived to think of human dignity as a property that can be realised or lost. Rather, human beings possess an unconditional, absolute and immediate worth that is independent of morally worthy action. Aside from the disagreement between Herman and Guyer over the actual source of the fundamental value, they both agree that practical reason is the measure of all actions, so it cannot derive its value from its effects (moral virtue or moral worth).

Cooperation between Moral and Nonmoral Motives

After divulging the value of man from morally worthy action, Herman went on to criticise Kantian rigorism (in a version that is similar to Schiller’s objection). First, she rejects the claim that a dutiful action cannot be regarded as having moral worth if it is motivated by a nonmoral ground²⁷. Second, she rejects the claim that an action can only have moral worth when it is performed from duty alone without any inclination. Herman raises questions about cooperation between moral and nonmoral motives. Since it is possible for a dutiful action to be performed accidentally even from nonmoral motives, how do we reconcile the motive of duty and nonmoral motive in actions that are in accord with duty, but do not stem from duty? Suppose that I pursue a morally correct action on a nonmoral motive. My action might have been performed in accordance with duty, but not from duty. If an action is not from duty, what can the motive of duty add when my action is already done in accord with duty?

²⁵ Reath, “Value and Law in Kant’s Moral Theory,” 127.

²⁶ Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness*, 2; Reath, “Value and Law in Kant’s Moral Theory,” 128.

²⁷ Richard G. Henson, “What Kant Might Have Said: Moral Worth and the Overdetermination of Dutiful Action,” *The Philosophical Review* 88, no. 1 (1979): 39–54; Marcia Baron, “On De-Kantianizing the Perfectly Moral Person,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 17 (1983): 281–93; Howard J. Curzer, “From Duty, Moral Worth, Good Will,” *Dialogue* 36, no. 02 (1997): 287–322; Onora O’Neill, *Acting on Principle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

For example, Richard Henson could argue that dutiful actions can only be judged to have moral worth when the agent's moral fitness is assessed against the motive of duty (the limiting condition) at the time of action²⁸. But for her, we must never ignore the cooperation between the motive of duty and the nonmoral motives in our assessment of the moral fitness of persons. Herman takes on Henson by querying whether the motive of duty can be sufficient by itself. Whether moral motives can be taken to be sufficient by itself insofar as the agent produced dutiful action did not need cooperating motives or did not need the aid of cooperating motives when he confronted the conflict of motives at the time of action. In her view, neither of these provide support for how dutiful action can have moral worth. So, she concludes that the motive of duty by itself cannot initiate a permissible action²⁹. In other words, the object (end) of permissible action by itself has no moral worth. As she puts it:

The role of the motive of duty can only be in the background, as an effective limiting condition, requiring that the agent not act contrary to duty. If the agent loses interest in his proposed course of action, the motive of duty can have nothing to say about what he should do until another course of action is proposed. In other words, permissible actions cannot be done “from the motive of duty.” Therefore, merely permissible actions, even when they are performed on the condition that they are permissible (that is, even when the motive of duty is effective as a limiting condition in them), cannot have moral worth³⁰.

Here, Herman is arguing that an agent may think that his action has moral worth when his action is performed from the motive of duty alone, but merely permissible actions have no moral worth. Herman, nonetheless, finds the moral worth to be narrowly in the motive of duty when its role is considered as the determining ground of an agent's motive for action. An action performed from the motive of duty is said to be right when its determining ground originates from the duty motive. To say action is required is to say there is a reason for performing the action. She writes that:

For an action to be a candidate for moral worth, it must make a moral difference whether it is performed. (Only then is it even possible for the action to be done from the motive of duty.) For an action to have

²⁸ Henson, “What Kant Might Have Said: Moral Worth and the Overdetermination of Dutiful Action.”

²⁹ Barbara Herman, “On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty,” *The Philosophical Review* 90, no. 3 (1981): 367,374.

³⁰ Herman, “On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty,” 374–75.

moral worth, moral considerations must determine how the agent conceives of his action (he understands his action to be what morality requires), and this conception of his action must then determine what he does. (It is when this condition is satisfied that a maxim of action has moral content). That is, an action has moral worth if it is required by duty and has as its primary motive the motive of duty. The motive of duty need not reflect the only interest the agent has in the action (or its effect); it must, however, be the interest that determines the agent's acting as he did³¹.

Herman, like H. J. Paton, suggests that Kant argues that morally worthy actions must be done only from duty, but she differs from Paton by claiming that the presence of inclination does not necessarily diminish a morally required action from having moral worth. In her concluding remarks on acting in accordance with duty, but not from duty, Herman says:

Although we should never act contrary to duty, the function of the motive of duty is not to press constantly for more dutiful actions, or to get us to see the most trivial actions as occasions for virtue: rather it is to keep us free of the effects of temptations in ordinary situations that can suggest morally prohibited courses of action. It is only in its function as a primary motive that one acts from the motive of duty at all, and only those actions that are required (by the categorical imperative) can have the motive of duty as a primary motive. As a limiting condition, the motive of duty can be present in (or satisfied by) an action, and yet that action have no moral import. Thus, we can preserve the sense in which, for Kant, the motive of duty is ubiquitous-governing all our actions without having to accept the view that all of our actions must be seen as matters of duty³².

Thus, there is no need for the moral component in the conception of the action that is to be pursued. The motive of duty cannot be seen as preventing an agent from acting in a morally impermissible way, even if it comes from the inclination to act as morally required. The mere presence of the inclination does not necessarily indicate a denial of moral worth. Rather that I should be regarded as being morally fit when I act from an effective and primary moral motive. Herman's argument is that "the nature of my moral fitness contains more than the presence of a moral motive sufficient to

³¹ Herman, "On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty," 375.

³² Herman, "On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty"; H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative: A Study in Kant's Moral Philosophy* (Hutchinson's University Library, 1947).

produce a dutiful action. It expresses a kind of independence from circumstances and needs, such that in acting from the motive of duty, we are free”³³.

Her insistence on the cooperation between the motive of duty and inclination is not far-fetched and comes from her concern to address in a non-arbitrary way the struggle there is between open-ended demands for help by the vulnerable people in the world and the limits of the reasonable demands that these people can possibly make. She contends that we have a duty of beneficence and there are justifications for prioritising other people’s demands for help. Something is the right thing to do if it is the benevolent thing to do. Herman draws from H. A. Prichard’s separation of moral justification from appeal to purpose³⁴ when she concludes that continued demand for the justification of moral constraint is superfluous. Instead, she argues that our attention should be drawn away from attempting to morally justify the legitimacy of moral constraint because we need to leave deontology behind. Alternatively, she posits that we should embrace Prichard’s acting dutifully for its own sake³⁵. Accordingly, the motivating ground of duty in our daily moral judgement and action is an action that is done for – or from – moral reasons.

Therefore, in the moral determination of what action is right or wrong, the motivating ground is inconsequential. The motivating ground of action is only important in human relations when we are making a determination of character. Herman, after Prichard, has shifted the ethical concerns of Kant from the agent acting to the person affected by an action, as she contended that a moral agent would be a strange person without his personality³⁶. A moral agent possesses his personality in virtue of his rationality. It is this character that defines his moral nature (his capacity to will correctly). For her, the will is a “norm-constituted power”, that is, the power to perform an action from principles. Herman advocated moral literacy, which she termed as the ‘minimum moral competence’ a rational being is expected to possess, i.e. the grounding of moral responsibility and development of moral character.

³³ Herman, “On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty,” 382.

³⁴ H. A. Prichard, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” *Mind* 21, no. 81 (1912): 21–37.

³⁵ By this, Herman is saying that our motives belong to the realms of virtue and not morality, and that inasmuch as we believe that it is purposeful when we perform an action from a sense of duty, then it is performed morally right. Through this, she believes that doing what is right requires no further inference to purpose beyond this. See, Barbara Herman, “Morality and Everyday Life,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 74, no. 2 (2000): 29–30.

³⁶ Barbara Herman, “Morality and Moral Theory,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 83, no. 2 (2009): 66–67.

For Herman, the formal requirement of morality is nothing but the conception of rational beings as possessing fundamental value. The single principle of morality is the notion of rationality, which itself is a value that is reason-given. In other words, without a proper understanding of the notion of value, we cannot understand what Kant calls practical reason. Inasmuch as pure reason is the principle of duty, it must be done by a conception of value. As I understand Kant, practical reason is not a sort of instrumental rationality in the manner that Herman has argued. For example, Herman would argue that an action is morally good if the moral agent pursues an act because he cares about the moral ends involved. I believe this sort of new Kantian reading of Kant is uncharitable to Kant, to say the least. Perhaps, this uncharitable criticism of Kant is best characterised by Karl Ameriks, as follows: its advocator tells us to refrain ‘Back to Kant’ but instead promotes ‘Away from Kant!’³⁷ Jerome B. Schneewind, like Ameriks, has also trenchantly argued against this sort of reading. In his view, if we leave deontology behind, we are departing from Kant himself and following a general and historically repositioned Kantianism³⁸. For Kant, however, instrumental rationality is not welcomed because every rational being must always strive to perfect his imperfect rationality by acting from duty.

Next, I examine what Kant means by the assertion that “rational nature exists as an end in itself” (*GMS* 4:428). In order to underscore Kant’s rationale for this assertion, I focus on Heiner Klemme’s analysis of it, where he argues that dignity is a normative concept.

“Rational Nature Exists as an End in Itself”

In his reflection on Oliver Sensen’s influential interpretation of the Formula of Humanity in “*Kant on Human Dignity*” (2011), Heiner Klemme replied to Sensen by stating that Kant holds that “rational nature exists as an end in itself”. Unlike Herman and other Kantian value theorists, such as Allen Wood, Thomas Hill, Samuel Kirstein, Elisabeth Schmidt, and Dieter Schönecker, Klemme concedes that dignity is not a value property that predates human life. For example, Allen Wood observed that the dignity

³⁷ Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6.

³⁸ Jerome Schneewind, “Kant and Stoic Ethics,” in *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty*, ed. Stephen Engstrom and Jennifer Whiting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 288.

of man is a value that is prior to that of human life, and Schmidt and Schönecker have argued that human dignity is possessed in virtue of an absolute value that is an intrinsic metaphysical property³⁹. Klemme, nonetheless, contends that rational nature, according to Kant in the *Groundwork*, is an end in itself and notably a normative concept⁴⁰.

Sensen had argued that dignity is not a non-relational value property but a relational property⁴¹. According to Sensen, the idea of inner value, as propagated by Kant, cannot be conceived as containing a normative component, as if it has an inherent value that is dependent on nothing else⁴². Conceiving Kant's dignity in this light would not capture the twofold structure of Kant's conception of dignity: "initial dignity" and "realised dignity"⁴³. "Initial dignity", according to Sensen, is possessed in virtue of our capacity for freedom, but we need to elevate ourselves far above our animality before a "realised dignity" can be achieved⁴⁴. In this way, we can conceive dignity as being a property that can be attained and relinquished.

Klemme criticises Sensen for not acknowledging that dignity lies in the internal relations of ourselves. Although, it cannot be used as justification for why the moral law is binding on us, it is a significant property that is crucial in understanding the nature of Kant's moral obligation. Klemme argues that dignity as a normative concept rests on the idea of pure reason that identifies an "end in itself" with an "absolute value", as against being a mere elimination of the law of nature. He referenced Kant's answer to the question: are there objective ends? His interpretation of the question was that having "absolute value" means to exist as an "end in itself"⁴⁵.

Klemme's premise is drawn from (*GMS* 4: 427-8). There, Kant says:

The will is thought of as a faculty of determining itself to action in accordance with representation of certain laws, and such a faculty can

³⁹ Allen W. Wood, "Human Dignity, Right and the Realm of Ends," in *Conference on Dignity and Law*, 2007, 8; Dieter Schönecker, "Bemerkungen Zu Oliver Sensen, Kant on Human Dignity," *Kant-Studien* 106, no. 1 (2015): 73; Elke Elisabeth Schmidt and Dieter Schönecker, "Kant's Moral Realism Regarding Dignity and Value: Some Comments on the Tugendlehre," in *Realism and Antirealism in Kant's Moral Philosophy: New Essays*, ed. Robinson dos Santos and Elke Elisabeth Schmidt (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 149; Dieter Schönecker and Elke Elisabeth Schmidt, "Kant's Ground-Thesis. On Dignity and Value in the *Groundwork*," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 52, no. 1 (2018): 81–95.

⁴⁰ Klemme, "„die Vernünftige Natur Existirt Als Zweck an Sich Selbst.“," 88.

⁴¹ Oliver Sensen, *Kant on Human Dignity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 162.

⁴² Sensen, *Kant on Human Dignity*, 32, 35, 134, 189.

⁴³ Sensen, *Kant on Human Dignity*, 153, 162, 168-9.

⁴⁴ Sensen, *Kant on Human Dignity*, 168–69.

⁴⁵ Klemme, "„die Vernünftige Natur Existirt Als Zweck an Sich Selbst.“," 91.

be found only on rational being. Now what serves the will as the objective ground of its self-determination is an end; and if this end is given by reason alone, then it must be equally valid for all rational beings (*GMS* 4: 427).

In the just quoted passage, Kant begins to lay the foundation to differentiating objective ends from subjective ends and concludes that “the ends a rational being arbitrarily proposes to himself... are (material ends) all merely relative... and they can be grounds only for hypothetical imperatives” (*GMS* 4:428). Kant therein rationalised that something must exist which has “absolute value” in itself and at the same time an “end in itself” that could be the grounds of the categorical imperative. Kant, similarly, makes this point in the *Naturrecht Feyerabend* lectures note of 1784 (*NF* 27:1319-20), but does so in relation to freedom being the source of value in the world.

In the *Groundwork*, Kant asserts that “humanity and every rational being exist as an end in itself” because he is not “merely a subjective end, but an objective end” (*GMS* 4:428). He further claims that if a supreme practical principle, that is, a categorical imperative must exist, it is because “rational nature exists as an end in itself” (*GMS* 4:428). This suggests that in virtue of having a capacity for practical rationality, a rational being is absolutely valuable over mere things in nature and at the same time an end in itself.

Here lies Kant’s Formula of Humanity: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, either in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never as simply as a means” (*GMS* 4:429). It is suggestive of this formulation that a man should be treated as an end in itself for the sake of humanity (rational nature). This formulation has been interpreted by some commentators to mean that human beings possess a certain dignity; a moral prestige that justifies their rights to never be ‘dehumanized’ but always be respected unconditionally. They argued that with the formulation of Humanity, Kant should be understood as saying that we have dignity because we have reason and freedom and that we have human rights because we have dignity. Some prominent Kantian scholars, such as Herman, Wood, Hill, and Korsgaard, have esteemed the ‘Formula of Humanity’ over other formulations of the Categorical Imperative.

I think Klemme is right to point out that “if something is an end in itself, it is because practical reason is the supreme limiting condition of all his freedom of action,

that is, his subject ends” (*GMS* 4:431), because Kant pointed out that “the principle of humanity and of every rational nature in general... lies objectively in the legislation of universal law” (*GMS* 4:431). Therefore, “all maxims are rejected which are not consistent with the will’s own legislation of universal law. Because the will is not just subject to the law but is subject to it in such a way that it is being regarded as legislating for itself and only on this account as being subject to the law (as its author)” (*GMS* 4:431). But why should the will regard itself as the author of the universal law? For Kant, a man is a lawgiver if he regards himself as a rational being. As he argued, reason regards the will as giving universal law for the idea of the dignity of a rational being and it is for that reason alone he must obey no other law than that which he gives to himself (*GMS* 4:434).

But in virtue of what does a man have dignity? This question has generated contention in recent years, particularly since the publication of Sensen’s book, “Kant on Human Dignity.” As I understand it, Kant provides two textual answers that seem to be paradoxical claims, particularly in the *Groundwork* (although we also find this in the *Metaphysics of Morals* and other writings). First, Kant claims that if “rational nature exists as an end in itself” (*GMS* 4:428), then “rational nature is morality and dignity, insofar it is capable of morality” (*GMS* 4:435). Second, he claims that although “autonomy is the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature” (*GMS* 4:436), man has a certain dignity and sublimity insofar as “he fulfils all his duties” (*GMS* 4:440) because he must make practical use of his freedom and adopt the maxim of action that can pass the universalizability test. Kant talked about the concerns of the necessary duty to oneself and others in (*GMS* 4:429-30). There, he emphasised that these duties must not be violated for whatever reason. Elsewhere, I shall argue that both of the claims are not really contradictory if we are clear that Kant has two kinds of dignity.

Regardless of whether one conceives of dignity on the first or second account, there seems to be a consensus in the literature that dignity is grounded on autonomy. Since a man is a lawgiver, he sets laws freely for himself through reason and he is obliged to act according to the maxim. Doing otherwise is a disregard for the law (*GMS* 4:440). Here, Kant had only just begun to lay the foundation for how we can answer the question that he raised in the *Groundwork I*: is there anyone who wills that his maxims

become a universal law? (*GMS* 4:403). Since “the moral worth of an action depends simply on the maxim according to which action is done” (*GMS* 4:403), no one “should act except in such a way that he will that his maxim should become a universal law” (*GMS* 4:402).

Klemme understands that Kant provided two thoughts regarding the principle of the categorical imperative. First, like Herman, he read Kant as saying that in virtue of capacity to reason for himself, a man is an end in itself. By means of reason, he is a limiting condition of all subjective ends and, thus, is not under the law of nature, but under the law of reason, as he is above the rest of nature⁴⁶. Second, that Kant’s assertion that “rational nature exists as an end in itself” is an expression of value. He claims that Kant was not only making a description of the value of man over mere things in nature. Rather, Kant should be interpreted as saying a man is an “end in itself” because he is a rational being that possesses an “absolute value” (*GMS* 4:428) which is above all price and without equivalence⁴⁷.

Consequently, Klemme read Kant as saying that a man considers ‘his proper self’ only as a rational being (*GMS* 4:457) and his value lies on this account. A man can be represented and thought of in two ways: on account of his desires and inclinations, and his practical reason, independent of sensibility. Klemme then submits that valuable property exists in a man on account of his practical reason because his status as an end and as a value possessor are both on account of practical reason itself. Therefore, a man as an end in itself cannot be understood merely in a descriptive term, as Sensen did⁴⁸, but in a normative term.

In what follows, Klemme provides three readings from the *Groundwork II* to support his normative claim. First, that on account of mere practical reason, the will is an end because it can be “thought of... as the objective ground of self-determination” and because “it is equally valid for all rational beings” (*GMS* 4:427). Second, that Kant presents an end in itself and an absolute value as an identical concept on account of the mere practical reason that the will is the objective ground of self-determination (*GMS* 4:428). Third, the expression of the will as an end in itself is always normative because

⁴⁶ Klemme, “„die Vernünftige Natur Existirt Als Zweck an Sich Selbst.“,” 93.

⁴⁷ Klemme, “„die Vernünftige Natur Existirt Als Zweck an Sich Selbst.“,” 93.

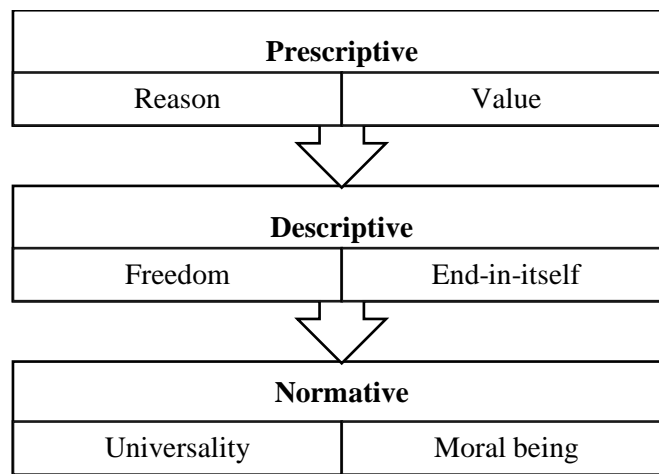
⁴⁸ Sensen, *Kant on Human Dignity*, 100.

it pertains how the will acts or becomes active⁴⁹. Like Herman, Klemme argues that, for the sake of having a reason to act, a man is an end in itself, and it is a normative concept on account of this⁵⁰. He went on to argue that if the absolute value is to be just a descriptive or prescriptive concept, the use of absolute value would not clarify anything (here, Klemme is only referencing Sensen's words that "absolute value does not clarify anything")⁵¹.

It must be pointed out that Herman, Wood, Hill, Klemme, Schönecker, Schmidt and many other commentators believe that Kant conceives practical reason and freedom as a normative concept⁵². Wood, for example, observed that "the fundamental normative act for Kant is setting an end, which is, therefore, the prerogative solely of rational nature, and it is an act of freedom (*GMS* 4:437)"⁵³.

Is Rational Nature Really a Normative Concept?

The figure below captures Kant's conception of rational nature in respect to whether it is a normative, prescriptive or descriptive concept.



⁴⁹ Klemme, „die Vernünftige Natur Existirt Als Zweck an Sich Selbst.“, 93.

⁵⁰ Klemme, „die Vernünftige Natur Existirt Als Zweck an Sich Selbst.“, 95.

⁵¹ Klemme, „die Vernünftige Natur Existirt Als Zweck an Sich Selbst.“, 95; Sensen, *Kant on Human Dignity*, 102.

⁵² Schönecker and Schmidt, "Kant's Ground-Thesis. On Dignity and Value in the Groundwork," 95; Schmidt and Schönecker, "Kant's Moral Realism Regarding Dignity and Value: Some Comments on the Tugendlehre," 149; Schönecker, "Bemerkungen Zu Oliver Sensen, Kant on Human Dignity," 72–73; Hill, *Human Welfare and Moral Worth: Kantian Perspectives*, 36,49; Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 51; Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, 73, 101.

⁵³ Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, 51.

From the figure above, I briefly show that rational nature is prescriptive on account of practical reason, descriptive on account of freedom, and a normative concept on account of morality (universality). If we may recall, Klemme argued that rational nature is a normative concept because rational nature exists as an end in itself and has an absolute value⁵⁴. Here, I suggest that rational nature is a normative concept on account of universality; that is, harmonisation of the humanity principle and universal principle.

Like Sensen, I start my argument by stating that being an end in itself is not itself a normative claim⁵⁵. As I understand Kant, the principle of humanity can only become a normative concept if it passes the universalizability test of the categorical imperative. This is because the principle of morality through which all moral laws can be derived is the universal principle: “act so that you can will that the maxims of your actions might become a universal law” (*GMS* 4:421). It is on this account that any concept can become a normative concept, according to Kant. So, Sensen was right to point this out that it is only through morality that dignity can become a normative concept⁵⁶. Kant provides a clue in the *Groundwork*. There, he said we have the predisposition as rational beings to strive to become perfect moral beings which are in the final end of nature with regards to humanity in our own person. If we neglect this predisposition and merely ensure our actions are not in conflict with humanity, we will simply and admittedly act in a way that is “consistent with the preservation of humanity as an end in itself and not for the furtherance of this end” (*GMS* 4:430). To further this end, it is a necessary condition that the formula of humanity and of universal law is harmonised or made identical (*GMS* 4:437-8).

Conclusion

The principle of humanity being an end in itself is merely descriptive and not a normative concept. It cannot become a normative concept until the principle of humanity is harmonised with the universal principle. In particular, humanity as an end in itself is a description of what makes someone the final end in nature by means of

⁵⁴ Klemme, “„die Vernünftige Natur Existirt Als Zweck an Sich Selbst.“,” 95.

⁵⁵ Sensen, *Kant on Human Dignity*, 169.

⁵⁶ Sensen, *Kant on Human Dignity*, 172.

freedom and the capacity for morality⁵⁷. (Without freedom, human beings would be under the laws of nature and be the means to someone else's end – see *NF* 27:1322). In addition, the expression of an absolute value is merely a prescriptive concept. When he refers to absolute value, Kant is only talking about what one should value, which is the practical reason, because value is a prescription of reason, and reason prescribes what is morally right or wrong to a rational being.

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⁵⁷ Sensen, *Kant on Human Dignity*, 172.

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