

THE CONCEPT OF DIGNITY AND DUTIES OF VIRTUE IN KANT¹

Milene Consenso TONETTO²

INTRODUCTION

It can be argued that the “Formula of the End in Itself” of the Categorical Imperative has been widely accepted and analyzed by commentators of Kant. Allen Wood, for instance, mentions that the idea of human dignity, which underlies the “Formula of the End in Itself”, is the Kantian principle that perhaps has the greatest resonance in the moral conscience of our culture and also the most universal appeal because it seems to support human rights (WOOD, 1998). According to Thomas Hill, this formula provides a strong argument against hedonistic utilitarianism because it forbids any form of manipulation or exploitation of an individual to satisfy selfish purposes (HILL, 1992).

In this paper, I will investigate what role the dignity of humanity plays in the derivation of the duties of virtue. First, I will examine the meaning of treating the humanity of a person as an end in itself. The establishment of the

“humanity duty” is related to the theory of ends that Kant develops in a systematic way in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. From the idea that there are ends which are also duties confirmed by pure reason, Kant argues that the Categorical Imperative has content. Thus, treating humanity as an end in itself involves the duty to promote the purposes confirmed by reason, and is not just a condition to restrict the actions of individuals. I will highlight Kant’s position that it is not enough to have a negative agreement with this principle, but that a positive agreement is also necessary. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant establishes most of the duties appealing to the idea of dignity. Thus, in the second and third parts of this work, I will comment on the justification of some of the duties of virtue in order to clarify the concept of dignity.

THE DIGNITY OF HUMANITY IN KANT

Kant makes it clear in the preface of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* that his main goal is to present and establish the supreme principle of morality, namely, the Categorical Imperative. According to this principle, the maxim of one's action should be submitted to a test in order to make it a universal rule. The general formula of the Categorical Imperative is presented as follows: "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (KANT, GMS, AA 04: 421). This formula has been widely criticized because it *seems* to consist of a completely formal test. This cannot, however, be sustained in relation to the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative. In this, Kant introduces the notion of humanity as follows: "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (GMS, AA 04: 429).

To understand this formulation we must consider two concepts, namely, will and end. According to Kant, everything in nature works according to laws, but "[...] only a rational being has the capacity to act *in accordance with the representation* of laws, that is, in accordance with principles, or has a *will*. Since *reason* is required for the derivation of actions from laws, the will is nothing other than practical reason" (GMS, AA 04: 413). That is, the will is the power within us to produce practical results (actions) from the demands of reason. Following his argument, Kant explains why the will should be determined by an end:

The will is thought as a capacity to determine itself to acting in conformity with the *representation of certain laws*. And such a capacity can be found only in rational beings. Now, what serves the will as the objective ground of its self-

determination is an end (*Zweck*), and this, if it is given by reason alone, must hold equally for all rational beings. (KANT, GMS, AA 04: 427, emphasis added by the author).

The will of a rational being is always directed towards an end that he gives himself. In this way, Kant argues that the end as an objective principle will be rational nature. It should serve as a restrictive condition of all relative and arbitrary ends. In other words, this restrictive condition can be translated as the duty not to treat humanity as a mere means. But what is to treat humanity as mere means? Onora O'Neill has an explanation: Using someone as mere means is to involve the person in a scheme of action to which s/he cannot in principle consent (O'NEILL, 1989). So, from that perspective, we can say that actions taken from maxims that require deception or coercion, or that may not have the consent of those involved, are wrong. When someone acts on these maxims, s/he treats others as mere means, and thus one's actions become unjust. In the *Groundwork*, Kant states that "It is obvious that he who transgresses the rights of human beings [*Rechte der Menschen*] intends to make use of the person of others merely as means, without taking into consideration that, as rational beings, they are always to be valued at the same time as ends [...]". (GMS, AA 04: 430).

We cannot, however, summarize Kantian moral theory as the duty not to treat people as mere means. If this were the case, it would have little to say about the real problems of everyday life. There is an important passage of the *Groundwork* that must be noted because it seems to explain in a positive sense what treating humanity as an end in itself would be. In analyzing the fourth maxim from the "Formula of the End in Itself" of the Categorical Imperative, Kant states that

the natural end which all men have is their own happiness. Mankind could subsist even if nobody contributed to the happiness of others, as long as no one subtracted anything intentionally.

But there is still only a negative and not a positive agreement with *humanity as an end in itself* unless everyone also tries, as far as he can, to further the ends of others. For, the ends of a subject who is an end in itself must as far as possible be also *my* ends, if that representation is to have its *full* effect in me. (KANT, GMS, 04: 430).

From this argument, one can maintain that respect for humanity as an end in itself can generate positive obligations and not just negative. That is, the duty to treat humanity as an end in itself cannot be fulfilled by being indifferent to other people. We must, therefore, take into account the life projects or purposes that others want to achieve. This is exactly what prescribes the supreme principle of ethics in *The Metaphysics of Morals*: “[...] act in accordance with a maxim of *ends* that it can be a universal law for everyone to have” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 395).

The concept of end or matter that appears in the *Groundwork* is better explained in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. In the introduction to the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant states: “Ethics [...] provides a *matter* (an object of free choice), an *end* of pure reason which it represents as an end that is also objectively necessary, that is, an end that, as far as human beings are concerned, it is a duty to have” (TL, AA 06: 380). The end is, therefore, an object of free choice (*Willkur*), and its representation determines it as an action. Every action has its end and this should not be an effect of nature, but a free act by the agent. Thus, for Kant, “[...] there must be such end and a categorical imperative corresponding to it” (TL, AA 06: 385). This means that, the ends

which are simultaneously duties, namely the proper perfection and happiness of others, are not established from the sensitive impulses of human nature, but from an individual’s own free will. Kant argues that

[...] pure practical reason is a faculty of ends generally, and for it to be indifferent to ends, that is, to take no interest in them, would therefore be a contradiction, since then it would not determine maxims for actions either (because every maxim of action contains an end), and so would not be practical reason (KANT, TL, AA 06: 395).

Thus, according to Kant, the Categorical Imperative has a form and also has a matter, that is, an end.

Having clarified the relation of the will to the purpose of pure reason, we can now properly analyze the concept of dignity. For Kant, all rational beings stand under the law that each of them should treat themselves and all others “[...] never merely as a means, but always at the same time as ends in themselves.” This results in “[...] a systematic union of rational beings through common objective laws, that is, a kingdom, which can be called a kingdom of ends [...] because what these laws have as their purpose is just the relation of these beings to one another as ends and means.” (KANT, GMS, AA 04: 433). In the kingdom of ends, that is, in a community where all people are treated as ends in themselves, everything has a price or a dignity. “What has a price can be replaced by something else as its *equivalent*, what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity.” (KANT, GMS AA 04: 434). Kant maintains that the condition for something to be considered an end in itself is to have dignity:

But that which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself

has not merely a relative worth, that is, a price, but an inner worth, that is, *dignity*. Now, morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, since only through this is it possible to be a lawgiving member in the kingdom of ends. Hence morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity. (KANT, GMS, AA 06: 435).

Thus, one should treat humanity as an end in itself because it has dignity. It is, therefore, important to explain what Kant means by humanity. In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant states that “[...] the capacity to set oneself an end – any end whatsoever – is what characterizes humanity (as distinguished from animality)” (TL, AA 06: 392). In the *Groundwork*, this explanation is used to define rational nature: “[...] rational nature is distinguished from the rest of nature by this, that it sets itself an end” (KANT, GMS, AA 04: 437). The end of humanity in our own person is also associated with the rational will, and therefore, “[...] the duty, to make ourselves worthy of humanity by culture in general, by seeking or promoting the *capacity* to realize all sorts of possible ends, so far as this is to be found in the human being himself”. (KANT, TL, AA 06: 392).

As mentioned earlier, the duties of virtue are those which promote certain ends confirmed by reason, that is, duties that are ends simultaneously. “They are the one’s *own perfection* and *the happiness of others*” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 385). Thus, Kant does not accept that the duty to respect a person as an end in itself can be fulfilled only by being indifferent. One should take into account the happiness of others, that is, the search for well-being, strength, health and prosperity in general (KANT, TL, AA 06: 388). Many of the ethical duties cited by Kant in *Doctrine of Virtue* are explicitly based on the principle of the dignity of humanity. These ethical duties

will be analyzed below. From the dignity of humanity, Kant deduces positive duties from us and from others, such as, the duty of self-respect and the duty of promoting the happiness of others.

THE DIGNITY OF HUMANITY AND THE DUTIES TO YOURSELF

The first chapter of the *Doctrine of Virtue* deals with the duties of the man to himself, considering “man” as an animal being. The first duty laid down by Kant is not to commit suicide. “The man is, by its quality of person required to save his life and has a duty to recognize this [...] to himself.” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 422). According to him, a human being cannot renounce his personality as long as he is a subject of duty, thus, as long as he lives; “[...] and it is a contradiction that he should be authorized to withdraw from all obligation, that is, freely to act as if no authorization were needed for this action” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 422). Thus, suicide is an act that by destroying the very existence of the individual also destroys the possibility of human freedom. Destroying the subject of morality in one’s own person is equivalent to eradicating morality in the world. “Consequently, disposing of oneself as a mere means to some discretionary end is debasing humanity in one’s person (*homo noumenon*), to which the human being (*homo phaenomenon*) was nevertheless entrusted for preservation.” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 423).

Kant claims that our perfect duties to ourselves also include the prohibition of lust (TL, AA 06: 424). Kant mentions the unnatural, and therefore, abusive use of the sexual attributes of the individual, because it violates one’s duty to oneself, and thus is contrary to morality. The foundation of proof

showing that the abuse of sexual attributes is inadmissible is: “[...] that by it the human being surrenders his personality (throwing it away), since he uses himself merely as a means to satisfy an animal impulse.” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 425). When being used as mere means, man renounces his freedom. According to Kant, such a defect is a high degree of violation of humanity in one’s own person.

[...] unnatural lust, which is complete abandonment of oneself to animal inclination, makes the human being not only an object of enjoyment but, still further, a thing that is contrary to nature, that is, a *loathsome* object, and so deprives him of all respect for himself. (KANT, TL, AA 06: 425).

Another violation of a duty to ourselves analyzed by Kant is “self-stupefaction by the excessive use of food or drink” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 427), that is, drunkenness and gluttony. For Kant, putting oneself into a state of intoxication is a violation of a duty to oneself as the person in this state “is like a mere animal, not to be treated as a human being” (TL, AA 06: 427). Because of excessive food and drink, the human being is inhibited, for a period, from performing actions that require agility and reflection on the use of his or her forces. Human beings, like other animals, have bodies that need to be nurtured. Without food they cannot survive, much less act. It follows that humans must have a good diet in order to preserve and promote the ability to act freely and rationally and likewise not to diminish this ability. Moderate quantities of alcoholic drink can bring health benefits, and a variety of food is essential to maintain the ability to act freely and rationally.

In the second chapter, Kant lists the perfect duties to oneself as a moral being. When considering man as a moral being, he takes into account only the humanity of the

person. Thus, he recognizes duties aimed at preserving character and dignity and not only bodily existence. These duties are opposed to the vices of lying, avarice and false humility (servility). The greatest violation of the duty of man to himself as a moral being is lying. “By a lie a human being throws away and, as it were, annihilates his dignity as a human being” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 429). Communication of one’s thoughts to someone through words that yet (intentionally) contain the contrary of what the speaker thinks on the subject is an end that is directly opposed to the natural purposiveness of the speaker’s capacity to communicate his thoughts. It is a renunciation by the speaker of his personality, and such a speaker has the mere deceptive appearance of a human being, and is not a human being itself. Thus, a natural ability to communicate that anyone can use in exercising their freedom is destroyed.

Kant understands avarice as “[...] restricting *one’s own* enjoyment of the means to good living so narrowly as to leave one’s own true needs unsatisfied.” (TL, AA 06: 432). This kind of avarice, according to Kant, is opposed to duty to oneself. “The distinctive mark of this vice is the principle of possessing means for all sorts of ends, but with the reservation of being unwilling to use them for oneself, and so depriving oneself of the comforts necessary to enjoy life” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 433). Thus, avarice is

[...] slavish subjection of oneself to the goods that contribute to happiness, which is a violation of duty to oneself since one ought to be their master. It is opposed to *liberality* of mind [...], that is, opposed to the principle of independence from everything except the law. (KANT, TL, AA 06: 434).

In relation to servility, Kant believes that a human being cannot cause injury to the consciousness of his dignity as a *rational*

human being, and thus should not renounce his moral self-esteem. That is, he should not seek to achieve his ends, which is in itself a duty, abjectly, in a servile spirit, as if he were seeking a favor. A human being as a rational animal (*homo phaenomenon*) is a being of little importance and shares with the rest of the animals an ordinary value.

But a human being regarded as a *person*, that is, as the subject of a morally practical reason, is exalted above any price; for as a person (*homo noumenon*) he is not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of others or even to his own ends, but as an end in itself, that is, he possesses a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world. He can measure himself with every other being of this kind and value himself on a footing of equality with them. (KANT, TL, AA 06: 434-5).

The man should not, therefore, resign his dignity, but should always be aware of the sublimity of his moral disposition. This self-esteem is a duty of the human being to himself. From our capacity for internal lawgiving and from the (natural) human being's compulsion to revere the (moral) human being within his own person, "at the same time there comes *exaltation* of the highest self esteem, the feeling of inner worth (*valor*), in terms of which he is above any price (*pretium*) and possesses an inalienable dignity (*dignitas interna*), which instills in him respect for himself (*reverentia*)." (KANT, TL, AA 06: 436). Kant states that the duty to respect the dignity of humanity in ourselves may be clarified by the following examples:

Be no man's lackey. - Do not let others tread with impunity on your rights. - Contract no debt for which you cannot give full security. - Do not accept favors you could do without, and do not be a parasite or a flatterer or (what really differs from these only in degree) a beggar. Be thrifty, then, so that you will not become destitute. (KANT, TL, AA 06: 436).

In this division of perfect duties to oneself, Kant questions the existence of duties with respect to the non-human nature, for example, animals, plants (KANT, TL, AA 06: 442). He argues that humans don't have direct duties towards themselves. However, they have duties towards themselves when considering the beings of other species. We have a natural predisposition to respect nature which may largely favor morality; a natural predisposition very useful to morality in relation to other men (KANT, TL, AA 06: 443). Thus,

[...] a propensity to wanton destruction of what is **beautiful** in inanimate nature (*spiritus destructionis*) is opposed to a human being's duty to himself; for it weakens or uproots that feeling in him which, though not itself moral, is still a disposition of sensibility that greatly promotes morality or at least prepares the way for it: the disposition, namely, to love something [...] even apart from any intention to use it. (KANT, TL, AA 06: 443).

Similarly, the violent and cruel treatment of non-rational animals contradicts the duty of the dignity of humanity within us. "It dulls his shared feeling on their suffering and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one's relation with other people." (KANT, TL, AA 06: 443).

To finalize, Kant describes the human being's duty to develop and increase his natural perfection with a pragmatic purpose. The man must not fail to enjoy the natural disposition and faculties that his reason can make use of. As a being able to propose ends, he must owe the use of his powers not merely to natural instinct but rather to the freedom by which he determines their scope. Thus, it is a command of morally practical reason and a *duty* of a human being to himself to cultivate his capacities. According to Kant, "[...] a human being has a duty to himself to be a

useful member of the world, since this also belongs to the worth of humanity in his own person, which he ought not to degrade.” (TL, AA 06 : 446).

THE DIGNITY OF HUMANITY AND THE DUTIES TO OTHERS

The duties to others include duties of respect and love. Kant points out that love and respect here cannot be considered sensible pleasures. To have a duty to others does not mean that it is mandatory to have these feelings toward others. According to Kant, this would be a pathological love, because people cannot be required to have a feeling. Love and respect must be understood respectively “[...] as the maxim of *benevolence* (practical love), which results in beneficence.” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 449) and “[...] the *maxim* of limiting our self-esteem by the dignity of humanity in another person, and so as respect in the practical sense (*observantia aliis praestanda*).” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 449). The duty to love our neighbor can be expressed as “[...] the duty to make others’ *ends* my own (provided only that these are not immoral)”. (KANT, TL, AA 06: 450). On the other hand, the duty to respect my neighbor “[...] is contained in the maxim not to degrade any other to a mere means to my ends (not to demand that another throw himself away in order to slave for my end.” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 450). Respect can be understood as the individual’s attitude towards the objective value of the dignity of humanity.

The duties of love towards others are beneficence, gratitude and sympathy. They are general obligations, because you cannot benefit or even be nice to everyone in the world. Nor is there a way to specify exactly how much you should be charitable, sympathetic

or pleased with other people. For Kant, “[...] benevolence is satisfaction in the happiness (well-being) of others; but beneficence is the maxim of making others’ happiness one’s end, and the duty to it consists in the subject’s being constrained by his reason to adopt this maxim as a universal law.” (TL, AA 06: 452). The benefactor is someone who helps people in distress - according to his or her own monetary situation - to be happy without expecting anything in return. Individuals have a duty to practice kindness to others no matter how they feel about them.

According to Kant,

[...] by carrying out the duty of love to someone I put another under obligation; I make myself deserving from him. But in observing a duty of respect I put only myself under obligation; I keep myself within my own bounds so as not to detract anything from the worth that the other, as a human being, is authorized to put upon himself. (KANT, TL, AA 06: 450).

On the other hand, the duty of gratitude “[...] consists in *honoring* a person because of a benefit he has rendered us.” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 454). The feeling connected with this judgment is respect for the benefactor. Thus, gratitude is a duty but “[...] it is not merely a *prudential* maxim of encouraging the other to show me further beneficence by acknowledging my obligation to him for a favor he has done [...].” (KANT, TL, AA 06 : 455). If this were the case, according to Kant, the individual could use “[...] my acknowledgment merely as a means to my further purposes. Gratitude is, rather, direct constraint in accordance with a moral law, that is, a duty.” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 455).

To explain the duty of sympathy, Kant suggests that it is necessary to cultivate certain feelings towards others. It is not in itself a duty to share with others their suffering and joys.

It is a duty to sympathize actively with the fate of others and thus constitutes “[...] an indirect duty to cultivate the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feelings in us, and to make use of them as so many means to sympathy based on moral principles and the feeling appropriate to them.” (KANT, TL, AA 06: 457). According to Kant, it is a duty

Not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found but rather to seek them out, and not to shun sickrooms or debtors’ prisons and so forth in order to avoid sharing painful feelings one may not be able to resist. For this is still one of the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what the representation of duty alone might not accomplish. (KANT, TL, AA 06: 457).

The individual must be exposed to this type of situation to develop feelings, and not merely share the sufferings of others in order to develop these feelings. He should actively participate in the fate of others. According to Kant, these feelings should be used “[...] as a means to promoting active and rational benevolence is still a particular, though [...] duty. It is called the duty of *humanity* (*humanitas*) because human being is regarded here not merely as a rational being but also as an animal endowed with reason.” (TL, AA 06: 456). It is not necessary to constrain the natural tendency of human beings to act according to feelings and inclinations. We can implement our general commitment to morality by acting according to natural tendencies when they are consistent with morality (GUYER, 2005). Human beings have feelings as much as reason. Our rationality requires that we cultivate means to achieve our ends. So individuals must learn how to use their natural dispositions to act on those feelings as means to moral and permissive ends, for they both express our autonomy.

The last duty toward others analyzed by Kant is that of respect. For him,

[...] the *respect* that I have for others or that another can require from me (*observantia aliis praestanda*) is therefore recognition of a *dignity* (*dignitas*) in other human beings, that is, of a worth that has no price, no equivalent for which the object evaluated (*aestimii*) could be exchanged. (KANT, TL, AA 06: 462).

Thus, every human being has a legitimate claim to respect from his fellow man, and is in turn bound to respect every other human being.

Humanity itself is a dignity; for a human being cannot be used merely as a means by any human being (either by others or even by himself) but must always be used at the same time as an end. It is just in this that his dignity (personality) consists, by which he raises himself above all other beings in the world that are not human beings and yet can be used, and so over all *things*. But just as he cannot give himself away for any price [...], so neither can he act contrary to the equally necessary self-esteem of others, as human beings, that is, he is under obligation to acknowledge, in a practical way, the dignity of humanity in every other human being. (KANT, TL, AA 06: 462).

The omission of duty arising from the respect due to every human being is vice, for it causes damage to the man in his rightful claim. Thus, we must recognize in practice the dignity of humanity in all beings.

FINAL REMARKS

In this paper, I argued that some positive duties follow from the principle of human dignity taken from the “Formula of the End in Itself”, for example, the duty of beneficence and respect for others. Thus, I tried to emphasize that treating humanity as an end in itself is not only a constraint for our actions, but also involves promoting the ends which

are also duties. Thus, duties of virtue include the duty to preserve one's own existence, one's moral, physical and mental capacities, as well as developing skills and talents and preserving the dignity of the person. Thus, it can be argued that these duties can arise because of the need for human beings to preserve dignity and hence the need not to be treated as mere means of preserving the existence of free beings etc. The duties of virtue discussed above aim to preserve the ability of individuals to exercise their freedom through the development of talents and skills that are used to achieve their freely established ends. To the extent that these ends are achieved, the duties of virtue promote freedom of individuals and also contribute to their happiness.

ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to analyse the role of human dignity to justify the ethical duties presented by Kant in the Doctrine of Virtue. First, I will examine the meaning of treating the humanity of a person as an end in itself. I will highlight Kant's position that a person does not have a price but an absolute worth, that is, dignity. Thus, in the second and third parts of this work, I will comment on the justification of some of the duties of virtue in order to clarify the concept of dignity.

KEYWORDS: Kant. Duties of virtue. Human dignity.

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NOTES

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2 Milene Consenso Tonetto received a Doctorate degree in Philosophy from the Federal University of Santa Catarina (2010), Brazil. In 2009 she was a visiting scholar at Michigan State University (USA), working in cooperation with Frederick Rauscher. She is the author of "Direitos Humanos em Kant e Habermas" (2010) and organized "Investigações kantianas: um debate plural" (2012). She is Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at the Federal University of Santa Catarina.

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