

Kant's Ethics and Kantian Ethics

Prof. Rae Langton

Lecture 4. *Groundwork* Section II contd.

Reminder. 4: 422-4. Kant's illustrations for the Formula of Universal Law: suicide, the lying promise, wasting one's talents, refusing to help others. The first two, when universalized, involve a *contradiction in conception*: there couldn't, he says, *be* a law prescribing universal self-killing, or universal lying. The second two involve a *contradiction in the will*: even if there could *be* a law prescribing universal talent-wasting, or universal non-helping, you couldn't *will* it.

1. *The End in itself, and the Formula of Humanity*

4: 427-8. The will, which 'determines itself to act in conformity with the representation of certain laws'. The will must have an 'objective ground', i.e. it must be directed towards some end. If this end is given by reason alone it must hold for all rational beings. Relative ends can only be the basis of hypothetical imperatives.

Suppose there were something the existence of which in itself has an absolute worth, something which as an end in itself could be a ground of determinate laws; then in it, and in it alone, would lie the ground of a possible categorical imperative, that is, of a practical law.

The thesis that rational nature exists as an end in itself, which is the basis for the categorical imperative, is expressed in terms of the Formula of Humanity: *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.*

1.1. *The End in Itself*

Kant is supposing there is something that satisfies 3 value conceptions:

- (i) *End in itself*: has worth unconditionally, independent of desire, valid for all rational beings (Wood calls this an 'objective end'). Contrast: relative end.
- (ii) *Existent end* (or 'self-sufficient end'): something that already exists, and whose existence is in itself an end', i.e. having worth as something to be esteemed, preserved, furthered. Contrast: end to be effected (*zu bewirkender Zweck*). The latter is the usual notion of end, but Wood says there is space for the former given the more general conception of end as anything 'for the sake of which' we act.
- (iii) *Absolute worth*: this may mean (i), but may mean 'dignity', a value that cannot be compared to or traded off against something else.

(See Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, ch. 4.)

These three ideas are conceptually distinct: in principle something could be an end in itself without being an existent end; an end in itself might lack absolute worth; existent ends may fail to be ends in themselves, and lack absolute worth; something with absolute worth might be a relative end and an end to be affected.

Kant argues that only humanity is an end in itself, an existent end, having absolute worth.

1.2. The Formula of Humanity

4: 429-30. Kant's illustrations for the Formula of Humanity are the same as for the previous Formula: suicide, the lying promise, wasting one's talents, refusing to help others. Suicide is not treating humanity in one's own person as an end in itself; the lying promise uses a person merely as means to an end he cannot share (theft likewise); failure to develop one's talents, or help others, admittedly does not treat humanity as a mere means: however it fails to positively promote humanity as an end.

Q1. Are the arguments for the two formulae *consistent*? The argument for Universal Law seemed to explicitly rule out the relevance of any ends, being concerned merely with 'the universality of law as such'. It's true that what were ruled out were contingent subjective ends, and necessary subjective ends such as happiness: but formality expressed in terms of lawfulness 'as such' is not the same as formality expressed in terms of an 'objective end'.

Q2. Assuming consistency, which of the two has *priority*? This question is sometimes cast as a question about teleology vs. deontology. Three options:

(i) *Universal Law first?* As a paradigm deontologist, Kant is supposed to give priority to the Right, over the Good: questions of duty get settled before questions of value. Is the conclusion about the goodness of rational nature then a consequence of discovering what the universal moral law tells us?

(ii) *Humanity first?* The Good is prior to the Right even in Kant. The goodness of rational nature is the basis for the Universal Law. Cf. Herman, 'Leaving Deontology Behind' (*Practice*, 208); Guyer's argument, which discusses the title (transition from 'popular philosophy' 138-47; and Guyer vs. Paton on the meaning of 'self-existent end' at 4: 437: Paton, 'not a product of our will'; Guyer, 'self-sufficient, independent' ('The Possibility of the Categorical Imperative', *Freedom*, 193).

(iii) *Interdependence?* Universal Law tells us to act in such a way that we could will everybody else to do likewise; Humanity tells us to treat others as ends. The connection is that we are ends because, as persons, we are autonomous deliberators. To treat a person as a mere means (contrary to Humanity) is to subvert the person's capacity for autonomous rational deliberation. But to will that is to will such subversion in my own case (applying Universal Law), and I cannot will that.

2. The 'regress' argument

Setting an end somehow involves ascribing objective goodness to that end; the objective goodness of the end is in turn supposed to require the unconditional objective goodness of the capacity to set the end (that capacity being humanity or rational nature); this in turn is supposed to be the source of the objective value of the end.

Some contemporary commentary

Kant saw that we take things to be important because they are important to us - and he concluded that we must therefore take ourselves to be important. (Korsgaard, 122)

Thus, regressing upon the conditions, we find that the unconditioned condition of the goodness of anything is rational nature, or the power of rational choice. To play this role, however, rational nature must itself be something of unconditional value— an end in itself. (Korsgaard, 123)

What is the relationship between (i) having the capacity rationally to judge what has value; (ii) thinking of oneself as having value; and (iii) being something that actually has value? (Wood p. 125)

Mike Ridge's reconstruction of Kant's regress argument:

(1) In making a rational choice, a rational agent rightly judges the object of her choice to be good. [an

analysis of what it is to make a rational choice]

(2) The best explanation of the object of a rational agent's rational choice's being good is simply that it *is* an object of a rational choice [any alternative explanation involves a problematic form of moral realism]

(3) The object of a rational agent's rational choice is good simply because it *is* the objects of a rational choice. [from 1 & 2, by way of an inference to the best explanation]

(4) Anything that is good is either the object of a rational choice or is rational agency itself. [from the rejection of realism that underwrites step (2)]

(5) Rational agency is the unconditioned condition of the goodness of anything else. [from 3 & 4 via conceptual analysis of what it is for something to be the unconditioned condition of the goodness of anything else]

(6) For anything to be the unconditioned condition of the goodness of anything else, that thing itself must be unconditionally good. [(?)]

(7) Rational agency is unconditionally good. [from 5 & 6]

Mike Ridge, 'Why must we treat humanity with respect? Evaluating the regress argument', *European Journal of Philosophy* (2005) 1 (57-73)