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Critique and Evaluation of Immanuel Kant's "Respect for Persons"

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Kant’s Views

In the selection "Respect for Persons" from Immanuel Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant gives insight as to how all rational beings can act in a morally responsible way. A major component of his thinking turns around the idea that whenever persons look externally for ways to resolve moral dilemmas they are doomed to fail. According to Kant one's own internal moral compass works well as long as the foundation of moral reasoning is rooted in the notion that all rational beings are ends in themselves. An important aspect in utilizing one's own individual will to answer all moral dilemmas is that the individual is empowered. One is no longer under the control of outside forces with regard to action, but has reestablished the rational self in the driver's seat. With reason as the guiding light, and a moral foundation based on the idea that every rational being is an end, the individual contains a strong moral compass by which to navigate the seas of life.

In the introductory paragraph of "Respect for Persons" Kant claims that if something exists that has in itself an absolute worth, then being an end in itself, it could be a ground for definite laws. This thing that has an absolute worth is the rational human being and, therefore, the rational human being is an end in himself or herself. Kant describes these practical laws as a categorical imperative. It is important to clarify the distinction between means and ends in themselves. According to Kant, when humans are used as means "they are arbitrarily used by this or that will" (Krasemann, 69). Humans are used by others in order to obtain some end. Conversely, when humans are understood as ends in themselves they are viewed with ultimate respect and are, therefore, treated accordingly. Objects and inclinations have only a conditional worth; their worth depends entirely on the particular need with which they are linked. If that need becomes disassociated from the inclination then it ceases to have value; therefore, all objects have a conditional worth. Kant makes a distinction between persons and objects. Persons are worthy of respect as ends in themselves, while objects exist solely to serve as means.

According to Kant, if a categorical imperative for the human will is to exist, it must form an objective principle of the will based on the idea that humans are ends in themselves. The ground of this principle is "that rational nature exists as an end in itself" (Krasemann, 69-70). Kant believed that since all rational beings subjectively already view themselves as ends, and that this is universal, objectively humanity as a whole is also an end in itself. The practical imperative is summed up as thus: "Act so that you treat humanity whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only" (Krasemann, 70).

In the next section Kant discusses why all previous attempts to discover the principles of morality have failed. Throughout history all previous moral laws implemented in societies were based on moral judgments of others. These moral laws were expected to be followed and if they were not, consequences would ensue. But these were not the individual's laws. These external laws had a constricting effect on society. Even when the intent of the laws was just, rational humans were now limited in their freedom and forced to act by the dictates of an external source. Because the individual was no longer using his own moral compass to make morally responsible decisions, a limiting feeling resulted stifling the human will: "...one never arrived at duty but only the necessity of action from a certain interest. This might be his own interest or that of another, but in either case the imperative always had to be conditional and could not at all serve as a moral
command." (Krasemann, 70). Universal duty was lost while the individual was stripped of his autonomy.

Next Kant discusses the realm of ends: "The concept of each rational being as a being that must regard itself as giving universal law through all the maxims of its will, so that it may judge itself and its actions from this standpoint, leads to a very fruitful concept, namely, that of a realm of ends." (Krasemann, 70). The unifying principle underlying the realm of ends is that since each individual rational human is an end in himself, and laws created by rational humans that can be applied universally are also ends in themselves, then the universal laws can be united with the rational minds under one umbrella—the realm of ends: "Thus there arises a systematic union of rational beings through common objective laws." (Krasemann, 71). Inclusion in the realm of ends is contingent on the individual contributing universal laws as well as subjecting himself to these same laws. Kant makes the distinction between member and sovereign in the realm of ends as thus: members and sovereigns both give universal laws while subjecting themselves to the same laws, but when sovereigns create laws they do so in a completely autonomous manner. Morality exists in the relationship between action and legislation that flows from each rational being. Since these universal laws spring naturally from each individual's fundamental being, adherence to these laws follows naturally. The stifling and constraining feeling discussed earlier that results from being subjected to external judgments of reality is no longer present. Instead, an empowering and freeing feeling of acting according to the natural path of existence ensues. If it becomes necessary to act according to a maxim that violates the universal lawgiving principle inherent in the realm of ends, then members may do so. This is called practical constraint or duty. Sovereigns, however, may not violate the fully autonomous method of their legislating. If they did so they would cease to be sovereign. Therefore, in the realm of ends only the members and not the sovereign are subject to the principle of duty. Acting according to duty is independent of feelings and inclinations. The rational individual will act with duty simply because of the respect that each rational mind has for one another.

According to Kant's realm of ends, everything has either a "price" or "dignity." Anything that has a price is replaceable while anything that has dignity is indispensable. Things associated with basic needs have a "market price" while more frivolous things have an "affective price." Through morality, rational beings can be ends in themselves. This is so because only through morality is it possible for a human being to become a legislative member of the realm of ends; thus morality and humanity have dignity.

Next Kant discusses the value of nature and art. "Nature and likewise art contain nothing which could replace their lack, for their worth consists not in effects which flow from them, nor in advantage and utility which they procure; it consists only in intentions, i.e., maxims of the will which are ready to reveal themselves in this manner through actions even though success does not favor them...They exhibit the will which performs them as an object of immediate respect..." (Krasemann, 72). This respect places nature and art in the category of dignity.

In Kant's final paragraph he argues that human nature destines people to be active participants in giving universal laws within the realm of ends. To be free by being loyal solely to self-created laws is the ultimate goal of the individual. All worth is determined by the universal law in which individuals are active participants. In Kant's view, "autonomy is thus the basis of the dignity of both human nature and every rational nature..." (Krasemann, 73).

My Response

I thoroughly enjoyed Kant's "Respect for Persons." I agree with Kant that if something is deemed to have an absolute worth, one should use it as the foundation of a system of belief. By putting the rational human being at the base of a moral thought system, a categorical imperative is created that has a solid foundation.
In a discussion about means and ends in themselves, Kant claims one should treat other rational beings as ends in themselves and never solely as means. While this is a rather obvious suggestion, it is important nonetheless. If one is a rational being worthy of being treated as an end and so are others, then unification occurs in which all of humanity becomes united in a common purpose. In this case, the purpose is to create a morally responsible categorical imperative through which rational beings can prosper.

Kant says that objects have only a conditional worth that is temporarily associated with fulfillment of a particular need. When that object can no longer bring about fulfillment of that particular need, then the object itself becomes worthless. I firmly agree with this notion. That is one reason why it is important to take the time to reevaluate the amount of worth we associate with objects in our existence. Since life occurs in a temporal world of change according to the passage of time, the original value ascribed to a particular object in relation to the need it addresses may also change. Therefore, without periodic reevaluation one might be prone to cling to now useless objects.

In my favorite section, Kant discusses the reasons all previous attempts to understand the principles of morality had failed. He claims that previous moral systems didn't work because individuals were forced to accept moral tenets from external sources. Kant has absolute faith in human reason and the individual when they are acting as rational beings. Inherent in the notion that rational beings must look externally for directions as to how to act is the claim that rational humans do not know how to act without directions. That is a limiting thought and the minute one accepts that claim personal power is diminished. Individuals can no longer think about how to respond to moral issues. Instead, the key is to look away from self and live according to someone else's demands.

Next Kant discusses the realm of ends. In the realm of ends Kant makes the connection between rational beings as ends in themselves and laws that stem from rational beings also being ends in themselves. It appears that Kant is envisioning a "feedback loop" in which rational beings are first united under the premise that since each individual is an end in himself, then so is every other individual, and therefore, they are worthy of the utmost dignity. Next, since the universal laws that rational beings create stem from beings that are united in purpose and are worthy of the utmost dignity, then the laws are worthy of the utmost dignity as well. Finally, because the laws are worthy of the utmost dignity, then they will loop back to the rational beings that created them (by adding as another unifying principle to hold the realm of ends system in check). It appears that he is trying to create a system that continually strengthens itself with a built in method for doing so (the universal laws feeding back into the rational beings). Feedback loops are not novel in that societies constantly create external controls in which to regulate and maintain the current system. Usually these controls and regulations are sanctions intended to enforce compliance. The novel part of Kant's argument for the realm of ends is the claim that each individual is creating the feedback loop in which the individual is subsisting. A person is the fully autonomous creator of morality. To be completely in charge of one's own existence is a desirable concept. I also believe that there is an inherent dignity in following rules that one creates as opposed to following someone else's dictates. A person will be more likely to abide by the rules, because one agrees and fully understands them. In theory this is a good concept.

Kant's description of all nature and art being elevated into the category of dignity was really interesting. According to Kant, the minute one tries to evaluate art and nature on the basis of preference, its value is diminished. "They [art and nature] exhibit the will which performs them as the object of an immediate respect, since nothing but reason is required in order to impose them on the will... and puts it infinitely beyond any price." He states that if art and nature were subjected to personal preferences then one would violate its holiness. It is interesting to note that he doesn't use the word "holiness" anywhere else in the selection, reserving it only for the description of art and nature.
Kant concludes "Respect for Persons" with my favorite quotation from the entire selection: "Autonomy is thus the basis of the dignity of both human nature and every rational nature..." That is a wonderful and inspiring idea to close out the selection.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed Kant's "Respect for Persons." It is thought provoking as well as inspiring. In theory it sounds like a solid system of practical law, but without actualizing it one will never know for sure. Nevertheless, the ideas contained within it have permeated thought systems throughout the world and have influenced many people.

Work Cited