Kantian Ethics

In Chapter 10 of his famous book *Leviathan*, philosopher Thomas Hobbes writes on the topic of the worth of a person. He writes, “The ‘value,’ or ‘worth,’ of a man is, as of all other things, his price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his power; and therefore is not absolute, but a thing dependent on the need and judgment of another.” (Hobbes, From: *Leviathan*, Chap X). One example that Hobbes gives is that of a skilled tactician; a person who would likely be of “high” value during times of war and of a “low” value in times of peace. In his various ethical writings, Immanuel Kant explicitly rejects this notion. An idea central to Kant’s ethics is the idea that all people (or autonomous and rational moral agents) are owed respect simply because they are people (Kant, *Groundwork…*, 4:435).

In Kantian ethics, the ability to distinguish between things and persons and treat each accordingly is a notion at the heart of acting morally. For Kant, everything has some worth. But he makes a distinction between two different kinds of worth - *price* and *dignity* (translated from the German word “*Würde*”). Kant claims that things with a price as their worth can be replaced by some equivalent thing. For example, if I lose a wallet with just twenty dollars in it, that could easily be replaced by an equivalent wallet with twenty more dollars. On the other hand, Kant writes, there also exist some things that are “raised above all price” and “admit(s) of no equivalent” - these things are those which have dignity (Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:434). To Kant, not everything has a dignity. In fact, Kant writes that the only things with dignity are “morality, and humanity (or in the
original German, “die Menschheit”) insofar as it is capable of morality” (Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:435).

The second formulation of Kant’s *categorical imperative* states, “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.” (Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:429). Kant derives the second formulation of the categorical imperative from the first formulation (“act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” [Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:421]) and the idea that moral willing requires an absolute end. The second formulation for the categorical imperative is trying to communicate the idea that a person has a *perfect duty* (a duty which admits of no exceptions, such as, at least for Kant, not committing suicide [Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:429]) to not use the anyone’s humanity - their own or that of their peers - as merely a means to some other end. This comes from Kant’s idea that persons are what he calls *ends in themselves* - and not just as subjective ends like eating to satiate hunger - but as *objective ends*, meaning said ends are to be categorically pursued (Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:428). What does it mean to call people ends in themselves? Kant is never extremely clear on the definition of this idea. Remember that for Kant, an end is some purpose for a given action. An example of a subjective end might be satiating my hunger - for which my means might be consuming a cheeseburger. But Kant says humans are *ends in themselves* - or an end which provides a compelling reason for *every* rational agent to act in a certain way. It seems to me that the end in itself is the rational nature in ourselves and others - but only insofar as it is tied up in morality. Rationality has some special status in that it cannot be regarded or treated as merely a
means to some other ends - we don't regard rationality as significant only because of what we can obtain through it. It's also important to recognize that Kant's emphasis on rationality here does not necessarily mean that one needs to be “intelligent” in the traditional sense of the term to be considered as an end in themselves. Rather, persons must be rational insofar as they are able to act morally. While it's clear that for Kant, humanity and dignity are tied up in rationality, it's important to consider that this claim still does exclude some members of the human race - the comatose and severely handicapped, for example. But in his usual confusing style, Kant seems to use “humanity” relatively interchangeably with “rational beings.” To whom, then, does this doctrine extend? Who or what should be treated as an end in itself?

Remember the quote from the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* presented above that “morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity.” Kant also claims in the same section that “morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself” (Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:435). Therefore, it appears that for Kant, the idea of human dignity is inextricably tied to free will and agency in a greater framework of morality. To use terms previously mentioned, Kant thinks that certain components of what we might normally categorize under the umbrella of “rationality” such as skill, diligence, and wit each have *prices* - but that “fidelity in promises and benevolence from basic principles (not from instinct) have an inner worth,” or *dignity* (Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:435).

Kant is well known for his division of reason into theoretical and practical reason. Since practical reason is far more relevant to the discussion of Kant’s ethics, and has to do with the exercise of will, we will focus on that - it appears to be the more likely
candidate for the sort of “rationality” that endows us with dignity or that which makes us ends in ourselves. Kant uses two German words with distinct but closely related meanings that are both translated into the English word “will,” which Kant sees as the manifestation of reason in its practical form. These words are \textit{Willkür} and \textit{Wille}. \textit{Willkür} is used as the power to make choices about what ends one adopts, of the faculty of choice. \textit{Wille} is the sort of practical reason that presents categorical moral principles to an agent. For example, Kant developed the categorical imperative through his \textit{Wille}, but in order to live by it, he must make use of his \textit{Willkür}. According to Kant, any rational being that might exist has both \textit{Wille} and \textit{Willkür}, and that a perfectly rational being would always make sure they were exercising their \textit{Willkür} in ways consistent with the moral demands realized through their \textit{Wille}, because by their very nature the moral principles presented by \textit{Wille} are seen by the agent as unconditional.

Kant makes it clear that he believes dignity and the \textit{end in itself} are tied up in rationality, but he is not clear on what sort of rationality or what form it takes. Through his division of theoretical from practical reason, Kant presents us with (at least) two options - with practical reason as the far more likely candidate, since Kant believes that human dignity is tied up in the capacity for morality. However, the possibility that the \textit{end in itself} is tied up in some \textit{component} of practical reason, such as a being’s \textit{Willkür} or \textit{Wille}, is also an attractive notion. Or, perhaps an individual would require some subset of the components of practical reason. Understanding what it is that must be treated as an ends in itself is crucial to understanding the second formulation of the categorical imperative - as a very generous reading of Kant’s use of the word “humanity” might lead us to categorize all humans as ends in themselves, but a more
conservative reading of Kant’s texts (where he makes it clear that dignity is tied up in ones capabilities to be moral) might cause us to exclude certain humans and not treat them as ends in themselves should they lack (be it in its entirety or merely some vital component of) a “rational nature.”

Here, I suppose the best strategy might be to - albeit hesitantly - conclude that the end in itself is Kant’s “rational nature” rather than “humanity” itself, where “rational nature” must include some aspect of practical reason - be it Wille, Willkür, or some other component (such as the commitment to use ones Willkür to follow any and all moral principles introduced by ones Wille) - and might even include multiple aspects of practical reason. Humans, as rational beings with a moral dimension, are ends in themselves with dignity, both of which appear to be derived from our ability to act morally.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is another ethical theory first introduced by John Stuart Mill which, put simply, holds that in a given situation or dilemma the most moral course of action is that which maximizes utility (benefit or happiness) and minimizes any negative repercussions of said action. Peter Singer, a modern utilitarian philosopher of applied ethics and an animal rights activist, has his own views about dignity that stand in opposition to Kant’s. While both Kant and Singer appear to think that rationality is tied up in an individual’s moral status, it’s clear that Singer sees this sort of rationality as not terribly tied up to an individual’s ability to act as a moral agent like Kant does - but rather he appears to be referring to cognitive capacity as a whole (Singer, “Speciesism and
Moral Status”) and the capacity for suffering and pleasure (Singer, Practical Ethics, p. 51).

As an applied ethicist, Singer is aware of the challenge idea this poses to moral philosophy. This view, as mentioned before, could exclude individuals with the most severe of cognitive disabilities. On the other hand, Singer sees the “common-sense” view of “the equal value and dignity of all human life,” as equally problematic - as he sees the significant overlap between the cognitive abilities between humans with cognitive disabilities and nonhuman individuals without any such differences in ability as clear evidence against that notion (Singer, “Speciesism and Moral Status”). Pointing to great apes, dogs, and parrots, Singer argues that if we are to assign moral status based on cognitive ability, then the humans with profound mental retardation (as defined in his paper by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities) would have to be relegated to moral status somewhere beneath the moral status of the apes, dogs, and parrots (Singer, “Speciesism and Moral Status”), since it is clear that not all humans have cognitive abilities above that of certain nonhuman animals.

After considering several attempts to justify the view of the equal and superior value of all human life relative to that of nonhumans, Singer concludes that this view is mostly indefensible (except possibly, he admits, from religious grounds, but he is quick to dismiss that as not sufficient for justifying laws in a pluralist society). Singer then presents three ways we can reformulate a theory of moral status based on rationality that don’t cause any tension between the cognitively advanced nonhumans and the severely cognitively disabled human: In the first way, we can raise the status of all animals, granting them the same moral status we currently grant humans in an effort to
preserve the equal value of all humans. In the second, we could preserve the equal value of all humans again by instead lowering their moral status to the level we now grant to animals. The third and final way Singer proposes is to totally abandon the idea of the equal value of all humans, and instead replace it with “a graduated view in which moral status depends on some aspects of cognitive ability, and that graduated view is applied to humans and nonhumans” (Singer, “Speciesism and Moral Status”). Singer is pretty quick to reject the second reformulated theory of moral status, and ultimately deems the third reformulation to be the best and most defensible theory of moral status.

Singer also writes about the notion of dignity, calling it a “vague term” and pointing out how we’re always quick to use it with respect to humans, but with respect to nonhumans we often use phrases like “best interests” instead. He claims that we don’t speak of dignity with respect to animals because it’s not clear to us what sort of faculties might be required to possess dignity - why then, do we not hesitate to speak of the dignity of infants or the severely cognitively disabled? Singer writes “It isn’t clear how [a cognitively disabled infant] could possess dignity. If we say that she does, are we also prepared to grant dignity to nonhuman animals at a similar cognitive level?” (Singer, “Speciesism and Moral Status”).

Evaluation

Singer’s ideas of moral status and dignity are tied up in cognitive abilities as a whole. I’m not sure how convinced I am by this notion. It seems like the connection between cognitive abilities and moral status is a relatively weak one. Obviously, moral status must be related to some sort of sentience and rationality, but this “gradient” that Singer proposes whereby we use cognitive ability as the only consideration for moral
status appears weak. Ultimately, I’m not satisfied with the idea that cognitive ability as measured by several metrics including IQ (as referenced by Singer several times) should be the only determining factor for moral status. In fact, it feels almost as though it could end up being elitist to me. It doesn’t seem that there should be any reason to give a Philosophy Professor at Brown University, one of the brightest minds in their field, preferential moral status over a not-so-intelligent coal miner from China. This point seems to extend to nonhumans too; why should we extend preferential moral status to the “smartest” of gorillas over the less intelligent gorillas? Here, Singer appears to be thinking in the Utilitarian tradition of seeing people as means instead of in the Kantian tradition of viewing people as both means and ends in themselves. While Singer’s argument is logical, it seems be missing some dimension of morality and moral consideration. What, then, is this dimension?

In the section of his article “Speciesism and Moral Status” discussing what Singer coins as speciesist defenses of the notion of “the equal and elevated value and dignity of human life,” Singer criticizes the idea that humans and no others have intrinsic worth and dignity. He asks, “What is it about human beings that gives them moral worth and dignity?” He then goes on to say that there’s no reason that merely being a member of the species *Homo sapiens* endows one with moral worth and dignity, whereas being a member of the species *Gorilla gorilla* does not (Singer, “Speciesism and Moral Status”). I’m not so sure about that. Don’t get me wrong, I’m just as loathe as Singer is to extend elevated moral status and dignity to *only* humans. But I do think there are some potential answers to Singer’s question, “what is it about human beings that gives them moral worth and dignity?” We might say that well, humans are generally able to reflect
on morality, while gorillas and dogs do not. Humans are also able to ask questions; even the various great apes who have learned sign language have never themselves posed a question (I don’t have the citation but see the book *The Mind of an Ape* by David and Ann Premack). However, probably the best answer to this question comes from Kantian ethics: That which endows humans with dignity and elevated moral status is that they are *ends in themselves*. That is, no being on the planet has dignity by their very nature. Rather, it is through being capable of morality and moral consideration from which humans derive their dignity. Remember that Kant wrote the only things with dignity are “morality, and humanity *insofar as it is capable of morality.*” This is a very important qualifier. The key here is that dignity and elevated moral status are derived from the ability to act morally. It’s not sheer cognitive ability that endows humans with dignity. Nor is it simply that a given individual is human. Rather, it’s the ability to make these moral considerations that gives beings dignity. The next time I see a chimpanzee considering the morality of his or her actions or analyzing the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I will be sure to extend to him or her some dignity as well.

While Singer should certainly be commended for his attempt to build a theory of moral status and dignity that at least *accounts for* the cognitively disabled, his model ultimately fails in the face of Kant’s in that it only uses cognitive ability as a metric of moral status. It’d be interesting, however, to hear what Kant might have said when faced with the challenge that the severely handicapped pose for moral philosophy. Would the cognitively disabled qualify for citizenship in Kant’s Kingdom of Ends?
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Works Cited:


(Contains all works by Kant discussed).


