A Philosophical Appraisal of Kant's Categorical Imperative

Abstract: Whence be treated as intrinsic value? These are one of the Issues in Ethics. In this regard, deontological theories of Kant assert that individual persons have a special status and because of that status, we owe them respect that must not be violated regardless of the consequences. Based on this view, respect for persons and their rights and duties are the building blocks of moral reasoning. However, persons according to Kant, have intrinsic value because we are capable of making rational, independent judgements regarding how to live. So for the fact that man is rational and can make a rational judgement, he is said to be conscious when he is using his fellow men as a mere means instead of an end. The reason why this work is so important is that this abysmal phenomenon has become rampant in different spheres of life, especially in business, religion, politics, to mention but few. Moreover, following what has been said above and the formulation of Kant that we treat humanity not simply as a means only but as an end, which is our main focus in this paper. Equally as Dwight Furrow points out, for Kant, once we recognize that human beings have objective worth, we cannot treat them merely as instrument to promote the common good or any other purpose. And this means that moral reasoning must proceed, not from the hypothetical imperatives but from what Kant calls a categorical imperative. Expository and critical methods will be resort to in this regard to achieve the researchers aim.

Keywords: intrinsic value, Dwight Furrow.

Literature Review

Kant’s morality the (categorical imperative), especially the second formulation which is treating man as an end and not merely as a means only is captivating to the extent that it is hard to come across it without saying one or two things about it. This is explicit in the work of some of the contemporary philosophers. In short, one can say that most philosophers who find Kant’s views attractive find them so because of the Humanity formulation of the categorical imperative. This formulation states that we should never act in such a way that we treat Humanity, whether in ourselves or in others, as a means only but always as an end in itself. This is often seen as introducing the idea of ‘respect’ for persons, for whatever it is that is essential to our humanity. Besides, the humanity formula does not rule out using people as means to our ends. As a matter of fact let us look at some philosophers’ views with regard to Kant’s second formulation.

According to Onora O’ Neill in his article “Kant on treating people as ends in themselves” states that to understand Kant’s formula of the end in itself we need to know what it is to treat a person as a means or as an end. “To use someone as a mere means is to involve them in a scheme of action to which they could not in principle consent”(Spinelio; 2007). Kant does not say that there is anything wrong about using someone as a means. Evidently, we have to do so in any cooperative scheme of action. But there are other situations where one person uses another in a way to which the other could not in principle consent. For example, one person may make a promise to another with every intention of breaking it. If the person to whom it was given must be ignorant of what the promisor’s intention (maxim) really is. If one knows that the promisor did not intend to do what he or she was promising, one would after all not accept or rely on the promise. It would be as though there had been no promise made. One standard way of using others as mere means is by deceiving them. Another standard way of using others as mere means is by coercing them. If a rich or powerful person threatens a debtor with bankruptcy unless he or she joins in some scheme, then the creditor’s intention is to coerce; and the debtor, if coerced, cannot consent to his or her part in the creditor’s scheme.

In Kant’s view, acts that are done on maxims that require deception or coercion of others, and so cannot have the promise is accepted, then the person to whom it was given must be ignorant of what the promisor’s intention (maxim) really is. If one knows that the promisor did not intend to do what he or she was promising, one would after all not accept or rely on the promise. It would be as though there had been no promise made. One standard way of using others as mere means is by deceiving them. Another standard way of using others as mere means is by coercing them. If a rich or powerful person threatens a debtor with bankruptcy unless he or she joins in some scheme, then the creditor’s intention is to coerce; and the debtor, if coerced, cannot consent to his or her part in the creditor’s scheme.

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Furthermore, Cosmas Ekwutosi in his book, *Basic Issues in Ethics* states that Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative includes “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of others as an end and never as a means only.” For him, the word ‘only’ is important. Hence “Kant is not saying that we should never use human beings as means at all” (Ekwutosi; 2006). Human society would be impossible if people could never make use of one another. Every time I eat a meal, I make use of the people who produced and marketed the food, every time I read a book I make use of the author. Example could be multiplied. No one is self-sufficient as such; we need each other. “Kant’s point is that we should not regard people simply as means to our own ends” (Ekwutosi; 2006). Moreover, Kant’s choice of the term ‘end’ is to stand in need of explanation. The word normally indicates something to be brought about, something which we aim at in our actions. Perhaps we can best interpret Kant for now as saying that to treat people as ends is to treat people as beings who have ends. I should recognize that they themselves have of their own. “They have ends because they are free, rational and autonomous agents, they can act in accordance with purpose and principles, they are persons not things” (Ekwutosi; 2006). As moral being, capable of obeying the law out of respect for the law, a human person possesses an incomparable dignity which renders him or her an end, that is, one who should never be treated as a mere means to an end. So rational beings are persons, that is, they are ends in themselves. We should recognize them as individuals capable of leading their own lives and should not simply use them for what happens to suit us. It would be treating someone as a means to an end if I promised to pay him back the money he lent me, even though I never really intended to do so. Recognizing him/her as an end in himself/herself would intend actually keeping my promise.

More so, Joseph DesJardins in his book *An Introduction to Business Ethics* states that Kant provided a version of categorical imperative that are less abstract. He claims that ethics requires us to treat all people as ends and never only as means. Thus, “this formulation restates the commitment to treat people as capable of thinking and choosing for themselves” (DesJarDins; 2006). They have their own ends and purposes and therefore should not be treated simply as means to the ends of others. Thus, on this Kantian theory, our fundamental ethical duty is to treat people with respect, to treat them as equally capable of living an autonomous life. But since each person has this same fundamental duty towards others, each of us can be said to have the right to be treated with respect, the right to be treated as an end and never as a means only. I have the right to pursue my own autonomously chosen ends as long as I do not in turn treat other people as means to my ends.

More still, J. Omoregbe in his book *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study* states that “the moral law, according to Kant, forbids any man to be used simply as means to an end.” For him, this must have influenced Karl Marx’s strong protest against the exploitation of man by man. “It is offence against human dignity to use a human being simply as an instrument to attain one’s ends” (Omoregbe; 1993). It is not only the person who exploits another man that uses humanity simply as a means, but the man who commits suicide in order to get out of frustration also uses humanity (in his own person) simply as a means to an end.

In the same line of thought, W. F. Lawhead in his book, *Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, holds that Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative, (“act so that you treat humanity whether in your own person or in that of another always as an end never as a means only”), means that each person has intrinsic worth and dignity and that we should not use people or treat them like things” (Lawhead; 2002). For him Kant’s argument for this principle could be paraphrased in the following manner: Mere things such as cars, jewels, work of arts or tools have value only if Persons endow them with value. In other words, a Rembrandt painting will sell $1million only because many people desire it. Accordingly, such things only have conditional value because if people stop desiring them, they will be worthless (Lawhead; 2002).

However, insofar as persons are noumenal selves that transcend their empirical appearances, persons are not things. Since persons are the source of all conditional value, they cannot have conditional value themselves, but must have absolute or intrinsic value. No one can give you your worth as a person, nor can he or she take it away. Sometimes it may seem as though we cannot avoid using people as things to serve our own ends. For example, when you buy stamps from the postal clerk, you are using that person as a source of stamps. However, notice that Kant says we should treat persons “always as an end and never as a means only”. Hence even in the impersonal transactions where we are mainly interested in a person for the services that he or she can perform for us, we should never act in a rude or manipulative manner and we should always be mindful of the fact that it is a person with whom we are dealing. Hence, Lawhead believes that “an important feature of this formulation of the moral imperative is that Kant explicitly claims that we should treat ourselves with respect and merely as a means to some end” (Lawhead; 2002).

Many ethical theorists (the utilitarians for example) believe that ethics only governs our relations with others. However, one implication that follows from Kantian ethics is that we have moral duties to ourselves and not just to others. For this reason, Kant condemns suicide. If I decide to terminate my life in order to escape my pains and disappointment, I am treating myself as though I were a thing that is determined by external circumstances. Instead I should respect the dignity and worth of my own personhood and treat it as having a
value that transcends every other consideration. In the act of suicide, I am destroying humanity (represented by myself) and treating it as a means to achieve some other end (freedom from burdens). In another application of this principle, Kant says that even if I were stranded alone on a desert island, I would have duties to myself. For example, I should do what I could to improve myself and make use of my talents, instead of lapsing into idleness and self-indulgence.

Also, S.E. Stumpf in his book *Philosophy: History and Problem* says that for Kant, there is something about human beings that makes us resist and resent being treated as things instead of as persons. What makes us human is our rationality, and to be a human, or a rational being is therefore an end in itself. "We become a thing when someone uses us as a means for some other end, as when someone tells us a lie" (Stumpf; 2002). Furthermore, no matter how necessary such use of us may seem at times, we nevertheless consider ourselves as being of absolute intrinsic worth as persons. The individual human being as possessing absolute worth becomes the basis for the supreme principle of morality.

On another note, for R. H. Popkin and Avrum Stroll in their book *Philosophy Made Simple*, say that Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative has a long tradition in the history of ethics. For them, it is another way of stating such maxims as “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” It is an injunction to us to respect other people because they are rational human beings like ourselves. We should treat others as ends in themselves because that is how we regard ourselves. “To treat another person only as a means of achieving what we want is to disregard his/her humanity, that is to treat a person as a thing and fail to show due respect for his/her status as a rational human beings” (Popkin & Stroll; 1993). Consequently, this doctrine has important consequences for democracy. It supports the democratic views that “all people are created equal”, where this is interpreted to mean that no person should be discriminated against before the law. Besides, certain criticisms directed against this formulation of the categorical imperative have been based upon misunderstanding. If this version of the categorical imperative is interpreted literally, it might be thought to mean that no one’s interest and desires should be suppressed. But with such an interpretation, the view has the consequence that when conflicts between people arise, it would be impossible for the courts (say) to decide between them; for by deciding against one of the people, they would be acting against his/her interest. Such an interpretation of Kant’s view would lead to a form of anarchy, thus making moral life inconsistent with life in society. However, as we have pointed out, such a literal interpretation of Kant is mistaken. Hence:

In saying that each person should be treated as an end in him/herself, Kant is not implying that each person’s interests should be granted or acceded to. He is merely saying that in any sort of conflict between people, each person must be counted as being of equal value in the conflict (Popkin & Stroll; 1993).

Regardless of a person’s history, his/her present social status or his/her present economic worth, he/she is not to be discriminated against. All must be treated equally with others in the eyes of the law.

In the final analysis, one can find out that the idea of man being a rational being as such should be treated as one runs through in all the reviled philosophers thought. That is to say that just as one man is of intrinsic value so is the other and this value should be respected. Having seen the views of some philosophers, the next chapter bears Kant’s treatment of the topic. This helps us to have a clearer view and see how his thoughts relate or differ with those of the philosophers above.

**CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE PREAMBLE**

A categorical imperative is a principle that commands us to do something independently of what we want. ‘Categorical’ means without conditions attached. It is one that I must act on under any conditions. However, what then is the content of a categorical imperative? With this question in view, let us explore Kant’s categorical imperative in order to see what it holds for us.

**GOODWILL**

Kant in the expository of his moral principle started with the concept of Goodwill. For him, the only thing that is good without qualification or restriction is a goodwill. That is to say, a good will alone is good in all circumstances and in that sense is an absolute or unconditioned good. It may also be described as the only thing that is good in itself, good independently of its relation to other things. However, this does not mean that a good will is the only good. On the contrary, there are plenty of things which are good in many respects. These, are not good in all circumstances, and they may all be thoroughly bad when they are used by a bad will. They are therefore only conditioned goods that is, good under certain conditions, not good absolutely or in themselves. Consequently, for him “it is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a goodwill” (Kant; 1964). Intelligence, wit, judgment and any other talents of the mind we may care to name, or courage, resolution and constancy of purpose, as qualities of temperament are without doubt good and desirable in many respects; but they can also be extremely bad and hurtful when the will is not good which has to make use of this gifts of nature. “Moderation in affections and passions, self control and sober reflexion are not only good in many respects: they may even seem to constitute part of the inner worth of a person, yet they are far from being properly described as
good without qualification” (Kant; 1964). Besides, a good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes nor because of its fitness for attaining some proposed end: it is good through its willing alone that is, good in itself.

**DUTY**

Kant feels that a person is acting morally when he suppresses his/her feelings and inclinations and does that which he/she is obliged to do. Thus ‘doing ones duty’ is doing something that one is not inclined or willing to do, but that he/she does because he/she recognizes that he/she ought to do it. Moreover, Kant explains thus, “a human action is morally good, not because it is done from immediate inclination still less because it is done from self-interest but because it is done for the sake of duty”(Kant; 1964). An action even if it accords with duty and is in that sense right, is not commonly regarded as morally good if it is done solely out of self-interest. So for Kant, a man shows moral worth if he does well, not from inclination but from duty. It is for him the motive of duty, not the motive of inclination that gives moral worth to an action. On another note, Kant writes “an action done from duty has its moral worth, not from the result it attains or seeks to attain but from a formal principle or maxim- the principle of doing one’s duty whatever that duty may be.” This re-states the first proposition in a more technical way. Thus, goodwill cannot derive its unconditioned goodness from the conditioned goodness of the results at which it aims, and this is true also of the morally good actions in which a goodwill acting for the sake of duty is manifested. So a person who understands the nature of this obligation and acts upon it is moral; otherwise, he is not.

**IMPERATIVE**

Everything in nature works in accordance with laws. Only a rational being has the power to act in accordance with his idea of laws. Since reason is required in order to derive actions from laws the will is nothing but practical reason. If reason infallibly determines the will, then in a being of this kind, the actions which are recognized to be objectively necessary are also subjectively necessary; that is to say, the will is then a power to choose only that which reason independently of inclination recognizes to be practically necessary that is to be good. Thus, the conception of an objective principle so far as this principle is necessitating for a will is called a command (of reason) and the formula of this command is called an imperative. Besides, all imperatives (not merely moral ones) are expressed by the words ‘I ought’. When I say that I ought to do something, I mean that I recognize an action of this kind to be imposed or necessitated by an objective principle valid for any rational agent as such. However, since imperative is an objective principle considered as being necessary, and since action in accordance with objective principle is good action (in some sense), all imperative commands us to do good actions (not merely as some philosophers hold actions that are obligatory or right).

As a matter of fact, Kant writes that a perfectly good will would thus stand quite as much under objective laws (laws of the good) but it could not on this account be conceived as being necessary to act in conformity with law, since of itself, in accordance with its subjective constitution, it can be determined only by the concept of the good. Hence for the Divine will and in general for a holy will there are no imperative: ‘I ought’ is here out of place because ‘I will’ is already of itself necessarily in harmony with the law. “Imperatives are in consequence only formulae for expressing the relation of objective laws of willing to the subjective imperfection of the will of this or that rational being for example of the human will.” Moreover, all imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically. Hypothetical imperatives declare a possible action to be practically necessary as a means to the attainment of something else that one will, (or that one may will). A categorical imperative would be one which represents an action as objectively necessary in itself apart from its relation to a further end. Every practical law represents a possible action as good and therefore as necessary for a subject whose actions are determined by reason. Hence all imperatives are formulae for determining an action which is necessary in accordance with the principle of a goodwill. An imperative therefore tells me which of my possible actions would be good and it formulates a practical rule for a will that does not perform an action straight away because the action is good or because even if he did know this, he might still act on maxims contrary to the objective principles of practical reason.

**CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE**

In the previous paragraph we met categorical imperative as one aspect of the imperative. It is that which commands us to do something independent of what we want. Besides, our moral duty arises from our respect for moral law. “The moral law is determined by what Kant calls categorical imperative”(Ekwutosi; 2006). Consequently, for Kant it may seem to be a very strange kind of law which the good man is supposed to reverence and obey. It is a law which does not depend on our desire for particular consequences and does not in itself even prescribe any particular actions: all it imposes on us is law-abidingness for its own sake ‘the conformity of actions to universal law as such.’ However, to many, this conception must seem empty, if not radical and we have certainly passed from ordinary moral judgments to the very highest pitch of philosophical abstraction (to the form common to all genuine morality, whatever its matter may be). Yet is not Kant merely saying the minimum that can and must be said about morality? “A man is morally good, not as seeking to satisfy his own desire or attain his own happiness (though he may do both these things), but as seeking to obey a law valid for all men and to follow an objective standard not
The Formula of Universal Moral Law

The formula of universal moral law “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant; 1964), is the offshoot of categorical imperative, and the first formulation of the categorical imperative. For Kant, the first problem is to formulate the categorical imperative, that is to state what it commands or enjoins. “a categorical imperative merely bids us act in accordance with universal law as such as it, it bids us act on a principle valid for all rational beings as such and not merely on one that is valid if we happen to want some further end” (Kant; 1964). Hence it bids us accept or reject the material maxim of a contemplated action according as it can or cannot be willed also as a universal law. For him we may express this in the formula ‘Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.’ Consequently, there is only one categorical imperative. We may also more loosely describe as categorical imperative the various particular moral laws in which the one general categorical is applied. For example, the law ‘thou shall not kill’. Such laws are all derived from the one categorical imperative as their principle. However, from the example Kant gives by applying this method to the contemplated action of telling lie, it is obvious that he believes the application of his principle to be easier than it in fact is. Nevertheless, he has stated the supreme condition of moral action, and his sharp distinction between moral action, and merely prudential or impulsive action is fundamentally sound.

The Formula of Kingdoms of End

A kingdom of End is an imaginary society, (Kant calls it a kingdom of ends) in which everyone would be autonomous, and at the same time following the same law of morality. In other words, “a kingdom of ends is an imaginary state whose laws protect individual autonomy, allowing everyone to be treated as an end rather than as a means to an end” (Ekwutosi; 2006). Besides, this is Kant’s third formulation of the categorical imperative and it goes thus; ‘so act as if you were through your maxims a law-making member of a kingdom of ends.’ Moreover, this formulation springs directly from the formula of Autonomy. So far as these laws bid them treat each other as ends in themselves, the kingdom so constituted is a kingdom of ends. “These ends cover not only persons as ends in themselves, but also the personal ends which each of these may set before himself in accordance with universal law” (Kant; 1964).

The concept of every rational being as one who must regard himself as making universal law by all the maxims of his will and must seek to judge himself and his actions from this point of view, lead to a closely connected and very fruitful concept namely that of kingdom of ends (Kant; 1964).

Furthermore, Kant understands by a ‘kingdom’ as a systematic union of different rational beings under common laws. Besides, a rational being belongs to the kingdom of ends as a member. Even when he makes universal laws, he is also himself subject to these laws. He belongs to it as its head, when as the maker of laws he is himself subject to the will of no other. Thus, a rational being must always regard himself as making laws in a kingdom of ends which is possible through freedom of the will whether it be as member or as head.

For Kant only rational agents or persons can be ends in themselves. As they alone can have an unconditioned and absolute value, it is wrong to use them simply as means to an end whose value is only relative. Without such ends in themselves there would be no unconditioned good, no supreme principle of action and so for human beings no categorical imperative (Kant; 1964).

Thus, like the first formula, the formula of the end in itself follows from the very essence of the categorical imperative provided, we remember that every actions must have an end as well as a principle. However, we have a perfect duty not to use ourselves or others merely as a means to the satisfaction of our inclination. We have an imperfect but positive duty to further the ends of nature in ourselves and in others. This could be understand more with the example given by Kant, it goes thus; A man who contemplates suicide will ask “can my action be compatible with the idea of humanity as an end
in itself?" If he does away with himself in order to escape from a painful situation, he is making use of a person merely as a means to maintain a tolerable state of affairs till the end of his life. But man is not a thing not something to be used merely as an end in himself. Hence, I cannot dispose of man in my person by maiming, spoiling or killing. So for Kant, a rational being ought always to be treated as ends, that is, only as beings who must themselves be able to share in the end of the very same action.

**The Formula of Autonomy**

The injunction of autonomy is pointing to the fact that we are not to follow universal law for the sake of being universal, but for the fact that it is the universal law we make as rational being. So Kant states the formula of autonomy as “act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxims” (Kant; 1964). Consequently, this formula may seen at first sight to be a mere repetition of the formula of universal law. It has, however, the advantage of making explicit the doctrine that the categorical imperative bid us not merely to follow universal law, but to follow a universal law which we ourselves make as rational agents and one which we ourselves particularize through our maxims. This is for Kant the most important formulation of the supreme principle of morality since it leads straight to the idea of freedom. We are subject to the moral law only because it is the necessary expression of our own nature as rational agents. The formula of autonomy is derived from combining the formula of universal law and the formula of the End in itself. So we can say that we are bound to obey the law in virtue of its universality (its objective validity for all rational agents) and as rational agents which are subjects are the ground of this categorical imperative.

**The Possibility of Categorical Imperative**

For Kant to consider how these imperative are possible is synonymous with considering how it can be justified. To justify them is to show that the principles on which they bid us act are objective in the sense of being valid for any rational being as such. Kant always assumes that a principle on which a fully rational agent as such would necessarily act is also one on which an imperfectly rational agent ought to act if he is tempted to do otherwise. However, in order to understand the argument we must grasp the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. Besides, for any fully rational agent to will an end is necessarily to will the action which is a means to this end. “So to justify a categorical imperative we have to show that a fully rational agent would necessarily act in a certain way not if he happens to want something else, but simply and solely as a rational agent” (Kant; 1964). In the final analysis, it is the maxims to make universal law that marks humanity out as an end in himself. Thus, if a rational agent is truly an end in himself he must be the author of the laws which he is bound to obey and it is this which gives him his supreme value.

**Summary and Conclusion**

A morality contains beliefs about the nature of man; belief about ideas, about what is good or desirable or worthy of pursuit for its own sake. It is a rule laying down what ought to be done and what ought not to be done and motives that incline us to choose the right or wrong course. As to content of morality, it is either wholly or almost wholly concerned with relations between men, with how they ought to behave towards each other, with what general rules governing relations between man and man a society ought to adopt. However, in Hobbes’s words, the province of morality is limited to those qualities of mankind that concern their living together in peace and unity. Besides, Kant commenting on morality, holds that a man is morally good, not so far as he acts from passion or self-interest, but so far as he acts on an impersonal principle valid for others as well as for himself. This for him is essence of morality.

For Kant, man is an end-in-itself. The word ‘end’ in this phrase has the same meaning as in the phrase ‘a means to an end’. According to Kant, rational human beings should be treated as an end. The fact that we are human has value in itself. If someone is an end in itself, it implies that their inherent values do not depend on anything else. They do not depend on whether the person is enjoying his/her life or making other peoples’ life better. We exist, so we have value. Besides, this idea of man as an end is also applicable to us; we should not treat ourselves as a means to our own end; rather we should respect our inherent worth. This can be used as argument against euthanasia, suicide, abortion and other behaviours that can damage humanity.

**References**