

6. The Humanity Formula

SEP Johnson (2008) (adapted)

Most philosophers who find Kant's views attractive find them so because of the Humanity formulation of the CI. 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. Kant was clearly right that this and the other formulations bring the CI ‘closer to intuition’ than the Universal Law formula. Intuitively, there seems something wrong with treating human beings as mere instruments with no value beyond

The Humanity formula does not rule out using people as means to our ends. Clearly this would be an absurd demand, since we do this all the time. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any life that is recognisably human without the use of others in pursuit of our goals. The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the chairs we sit on and the computers we type at are gotten only by way of talents and abilities that have been developed through the exercise of the wills of many people. What the Humanity formula rules out is engaging in this pervasive use of

Humanity in such a way that we treat it as a mere means to our ends. Thus, the difference between a horse and a taxi driver is not that we may use one but not the other as a means of transportation. Unlike a horse, the taxi driver's Humanity must at the same time be treated as an end in itself.

Second, it is not human beings per se but the ‘Humanity’ in human beings that we must treat as an end in itself. Our ‘Humanity’ is that collection of features that make us distinctively human, and these include capacities to engage in self-directed rational behaviour and to adopt and pursue our own ends, and any other capacities necessarily connected with these. Thus, supposing that the taxi driver has freely exercised his rational capacities in pursuing his line of work, we make permissible use of these capacities as a means when we behave in a way that he could, when exercising his rational capacities, consent to — for instance, by paying an agreed on price.

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Finally, Kant's formula requires “respect” for the Humanity in persons. Proper regard for something with absolute value or worth requires respect for it.