

## KANT'S CONCEPTION OF HUMAN DIGNITY: SCHELER'S CRITICAL RESPONSE

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**Abstract:** Kant's notion of human dignity is considered to be the most comprehensive and fullest account available in the Western tradition. For him, every human being is a rational being, that is, possesses Reason, and it is his possession of rational nature that qualifies him to be treated as an end in itself. But this Reason is not something specific to particular individuals but exists in everyone else as *impersonal* reason. Neither a human being as a rational being exists for the sake of anything else nor he possesses value in relation to anything else. Rather, he possesses supreme value as an end in itself, and all other things exist and possess value for the sake of him. This status of man entitles him to possess dignity. This Kantian conception of human dignity has been challenged by Max Scheler in his *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values*. He argues that the constancy of Reason inhabiting all human beings makes it impossible to distinguish them as *individuals* and make them a "thoroughfare" for an *impersonal* rational activity. Scheler endows person with individually determining factor which is revealed through his *contents* of experience, that is, what he thinks, wills, feels, etc. Further, the person in the Kantian scheme, being the logical principle of Reason, lacks any *material* contents of its own and thereby the person is reduced to the status of a *homo noumenon* which is indistinguishable from the things such as plant, rock, etc. And thus the person is banished to a realm that cannot be accessed by reflection and thereby deprived him of his unique identity and personal dignity. The present paper elaborates these arguments of Scheler against Kant's conception of human dignity after giving an analysis of the latter.

**Key-words:** Dignity, Reason, Identity, End-in-itself, Intrinsic value, market value, Forms of experience, Contents of experience.

The philosophy of Kant occupies an esteemed and admirable place in the history of philosophy for its depth, profundity and terseness. But it has not gone unchallenged. Many of his posteriors in Germany and in other parts of the world have sharply responded to his thought. Among his posteriors in Germany, Nicolai Hartmann and Max Scheler develop their critiques against the Kantian formalism. As part of his critical preoccupation with the ethical formalism in general and with the concept of ethical person in particular, Scheler formulates some brief and forcible arguments against the Kantian approach to human dignity. This paper presents a brief analysis of Kant's conception of human dignity and the critical points developed by Max Scheler against this conception in *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values*.<sup>1</sup>

## I

**Kant's Conception of Human Dignity :** Kant's philosophical articulation of the idea of human dignity is considered to be the comprehensive and fullest account available in the western tradition. Human dignity was a central ethical value in the Enlightenment era of the early modern Europe. The expression generally means the fundamental worth of every individual person. It is a quality of person that entitles him to be regarded and respected by others. Kant has retained this general meaning but develops it in his own way in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*.

Let us begin by analysing basic points of the Kantian ethics, which are relevant to the understanding of his conception of human dignity. Kant's theory of ethics is avowedly called the "metaphysics of morals". A "metaphysics" is, for Kant, a body of pure and *a priori* knowledge which prescribes *a priori* principles of morality relating to human action. According to Kant, we are capable of willing to do something and this willing takes place either under the influence of our kernel impulses or inclinations, or by virtue of our rational motive. Whenever we will to do something under the influence of impulses or inclinations, then such actions cannot be rated as *moral* actions. On the contrary, whenever an action is motivated by our rational nature, then such an action attains the status of a moral action. A moral action, for Kant, must have an "objective ground" for its willing, and this objective ground is what is called by Kant "end". According to Kant, some ends are merely "subjective" and they depend on impulses or inclinations. But some ends are "objective" and they depend on our rational motive that is valid for all human beings. It is needless to mention that a motive refers to some kind of thought which moves us to will something, and the objective end is that towards which a motive is directed.

The will is that which initiates an action. It is not mere wish to do something; it means taking a decision to act or perform according to a maxim – the latter being the subjective principle of action. But the ground of its determination does not lie in itself. Nor does it have its locus in the nature of man or in the circumstances of the world in which the agent is placed, but in what Kant calls "the pure practical reason". It is Reason in its practical use or function which determines the will. The practical reason exerts its influence on the will by means of the moral imperative. The influence under which an imperative is issued by the will is what Kant is meant by rational motive. This rational motive concerns something that is not valid because something else is valued but something that has "absolute worth". The thing that has absolute worth is, for Kant, an "end in itself". The latter is the unconditioned and objective ground of the moral law or what Kant calls "the Categorical Imperative". The rational nature of man, for having its absolute worth, is the end

in itself. As Kant says “*rational nature exists as an end in itself*”<sup>2</sup> He continues,

This is the way in which a man necessarily conceives his own existence – it is therefore so far a *subjective* principle of human actions. But it is also the way in which every other rational being conceives his existence on the same rational ground which is valid also for me, hence it is at the same time an *objective* principle, from which, as a supreme practical ground, it must be possible to derive all laws for the will.<sup>3</sup>

What this passage amounts to is the following three-step argument: Since (a) every rational being necessarily regards himself as an end in itself, and accepts that (b) every one else is justified in regarding himself as an end in itself, (c) it is therefore an objective principle that everyone should be treated as an end in itself. The move from (a) to (b) is made possible by universalising the rational nature as existing in everyone else. The point to be noted here is that the rational nature or Reason is not taken to be specific to particular individuals but exists in everyone else as *impersonal* reason. Hence in (c) we find an objectively valid ground to treat every human being as end in itself, which follows from (a) and (b).

Accordingly, Kant formulates the following imperative which is known as ‘the humanity principle’: “*Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end*”.<sup>4</sup> Here, the use of the adverb “*simply*” is important. Kant’s point is *not* that we should never use human persons as means at all. Our day to day life would be impossible unless we make use of one another. Every time I read a book I make use of the author, every time I write I make use of people who has produced pen and paper, and every time I drink tea I make use of who prepares a cup of tea for me. Thus examples could be multiplied. What Kant stresses here is that we should not regard human persons *simply* as means to our own ends. All human persons – honest or dishonest, educated or illiterate – are ends in themselves, and we should treat them as such. A thing is that which is used merely as means, but persons are such that they are always needed to be considered as ends in themselves. A person who contemplates suicide due to painful circumstances, Kant says, should ask himself as to whether his action is consistent with the humanity principle. In his attempt to commit suicide, he is using himself as a means and not as an end in itself.

Kant has put forward the following justification for treating persons as end in itself. For him, nature is a system of natural ends which are hierarchical in character. That is, one natural end is dependent on another end, in the sense that one end exists for the sake of another. For example, insects exist as food for fish and fish exists as food for man, and thus the hierarchical order of

ends ends with man, for “man is the final end of creation”.<sup>5</sup> In other words, neither man as rational being exists for the sake of anything else nor he possesses value in relation to anything else. Rather, he possesses supreme value as an end in itself, and all other ends exist and possess value for the sake of man. This status of man as prevailing over all other ends is what entitles him to possess “dignity”.

Now, what precisely is the nature of human dignity in Kant’s ethics? Kant’s theory of morals is basically concerned with providing human beings with a status above anything else. In what Kant calls “the kingdom of ends”, persons are to be respected as ends in themselves and hence as possessing dignity. He contrasts “value” and “dignity”. Kant writes,

In the kingdom of ends everything has either a *price* or a *dignity*. If it has a price, something else can be put in its place as an *equivalent*; if it is exalted above all price and so admits of no equivalent, then it has a *dignity*.<sup>6</sup>

His point is that whatever has a price or a value can be rationally sacrificed or exchanged for something else which has an equal price or value. “Price” is possessed by all the various individual objects of desire, such as material goods or personalities such as skill, or diligence, or humour, or strength. If I buy a parker pen and immediately lost it, and if someone then presents me a parker pen which is exactly the same as the previous one, it will be just as good as my earlier parker pen and I will have lost nothing. The same is true of personal qualities. If I have intellectual skills and this may be, to some extent, compensate me for my lack of skill as a singer. It is because of the role that such things play in our lives, they possess value. But it is the person who gives value to these things. Hence a thing and a person should have different kinds of worth for each of them:

What is relative to universal human inclinations and needs has a *market price*; what, even without presupposing a need, accords with a certain taste – that is, with satisfaction in the mere purposeless play of our mental powers – has a *fancy price* (*Affektionspreis*); but that which constitutes the sole condition under which anything can be an end in itself has not merely a relative value – that is, a price – but has an intrinsic value – that is, *dignity*.<sup>7</sup>

Like the value of a thing or a personal quality, the dignity of man does not have market value or fancy value, and therefore it cannot be exchanged, replaced, or compensated for anything else. Further, in case of a thing or a skill a person can promote its value by means of campaigning or advertising the product or may develop the skill through rigorous training. But the human dignity cannot be promoted or developed as it is *already* possessed by the persons since their birth, whether he is honest or dishonest, intelligent or foolish. Thus thing has market value or fancy

value, but dignity is the highest ethical value possessed by persons, which demands sheer respect from other persons with no material gain. In the Kantian ethics, respect for moral law or the Categorical Imperative as the law of reason is identical with the respect that we feel for rational beings as ends in themselves.

## II

**Scheler's Critical Response:** In order to understand Scheler's criticism of Kant's conception of human dignity, let us begin with a brief survey of Scheler's concept of person. In our quotidian life, we think, will, feel, judge, love, hate, etc., and we do so in our own unique ways and styles. In executing these acts each human individual imprints him/herself upon his/her acts in a *unique* manner. No two human beings, for instance, "love" the same manner. Each individual has, so to speak, his own style and way of "how" he acts out the act of love. It is precisely in his *manner* of executing the act of love that accounts for his individuality. The uniqueness of executing the acts does not pertain to the psychophysical structure of human person. For, all human persons function in the same and uniform manner insofar as they are psycho-physical being, and there is nothing unique in regard to their embodied functions. The unique ways and styles, in fact, pertain to the *execution* of his acts. But the latter is not given to our inner or outer perception. They can be accessed and brought to the fore *only* by setting aside our embodied existence by the operation of the phenomenological technique of reduction.<sup>8</sup> The application of the latter method enables us to put the question of real bearers and their natural organization (i.e., men) in suspension rather than denying it, and thereby we can arrive at the realm of act-essences of different nature. The disregard for the embodied executing agent opens up the realm of act-essences that are interconnected to their corresponding pure objects by essential relations, that is, between thinking and a thing thought, willing and a thing willed, feeling and values, preferring and values, etc. These essential lawful relations are *a priori* to, and independent of, all our inductive experience. Now, the problem that we face is: What unites the act-essences of diverse nature, independently of an embodied bearer of these acts, supposedly wherein lie the unique ways and styles? For, the concrete acts with its individual imprint concerns always a unity of diverse act-essences. It is nothing for Scheler but person which is the unitary executor of these acts of different nature. Scheler defines the person thus:

*The person is the concrete and essential unity of being of acts of different essences which in itself precedes all essential act-differences... The being of the person is therefore the 'foundation' of all essentially different acts.*<sup>9</sup>

The person, according to Scheler, is a dynamic being and exists in accompanying each of its acts such as, acts of thinking, remembering, loving or hating, etc. Its life is sustained by the execution of acts but the person does not exhaust itself in its acts. Rather, in each of its successive acts the person has its presence. Each act has its uniqueness and peculiarity of its own but it does not encompass our personal existence in its entirety. Our personal existence involves a reference to the integration of acts, which is the person. The person has its unique and individual-specific dignity.

Let us now turn to Scheler's critical points against Kant's concept of human dignity. Scheler begins by pointing out that the notion of person in the ethical formalism coincides first with "rational person". Now, what is it, for Kant, to be a rational person? Kant conceives Reason as something immutable, fixed and universal i.e. it belongs to all men at all times, and it pervades all men as an identical essence. What Kant calls *pure* Reason possesses some static categorial laws, and the Reason in its *practical* use is endowed with the moral law. Both the static categorial laws and the functions of the will give rise to a notion of person who can only be characterized as *rational* being. Scheler writes,

It is no terminological accident that formal ethics designates the person first as 'rational person'. This expression does not mean that it belongs essentially to the nature of the person to execute acts which, independent of all causality, follow ideal laws meaning and states of affairs (logic, ethics, etc.); rather, with this one expression, formalism reveals its implicit material assumption that the person is basically nothing but a logical subject of rational acts, i.e., acts that follow these ideal laws. Or, in a word, the person is the X of some kind of rational activity; the moral person, therefore, the X of volitional activity conforming to the moral law.<sup>10</sup>

In ethical context, the person is assumed to be a logical X, which is the subject of all rational activities. This is the "point of departure" for every act of willing, which conforms to the moral law. It is the conformity of the act of willing to the law of Reason (the moral law) *alone* that makes an action morally good. Thus Kant glorifies the role of Reason governing the moral law, and writes off the *material* of willing, and indeed all contents of morality. It is this notion of person as endowed with static and universal Reason that Scheler has made the focus of his vehement criticism. It is this understanding of the Kantian concept of person that leads Scheler to put forward the following arguments against the Kantian approach to person.

Though Kant's approach prevents us from treating the person as a thing or a substance,

Scheler argues, it does not provide us any *concrete* foundation for the being of the person. The constancy of Reason inhabiting all human beings makes it impossible to distinguish among themselves as *individuals* on the basis of their personal being. For the rational acts bear no *individual* marks for themselves, which may enable us to distinguish one human being from the other. They are “extra-individual” It is precisely at this point that Scheler differs from Kant by endowing the person with an individually determining factor, which is revealed through his special *contents* of experience, that is, what he thinks, wills, feels, etc. In the Kantian scheme, the person as the seat of dignity and worth embodied in the rational will has been excised from the domain of human experience, which can only endow the person with his individuality. Consequently, the dignity or autonomy possessed by the person is what is *in general* and not the specifically individual-personal dignity or autonomy. As a result, the person in such a scheme becomes “an indifferent thoroughfare for an impersonal rational activity”.<sup>11</sup> Further, the person in the Kantian scheme, in being a logical principle of Reason, becomes the transcendental condition of the possibility of all objective entities. In the ethical sphere, rational person becomes the necessary condition for the possibility of experiencing the moral law. As a transcendental condition for the possibility of bare objectivities it lacks any *material* content of its own. And consequently the moral person, in this sense, acquires the status of a *homo noumenon* (as opposed to *homo phenomenon*) which is mysterious and unknowable to himself and to others. Logically this unknowable constant called *homo noumenon* is synonymous with the thing-in-itself as applied to men. Kant’s assignment of the status of *homo noumenon* to man makes him indistinguishable from any other thing-in-itself such as plant, rock, etc. Hence Scheler accuses Kant of banishing the person from the sphere of everyday experience to a realm that is inaccessible through reflection and thereby stripping man of his unique identity.

Let us now summarize the main points, in conclusion. As we have pointed out, for Kant, every human being is a rational being, that is, possesses Reason, and it is his possession of rational nature that qualifies him to be treated as an end in itself. But this Reason is not something specific to particular individuals but exists in everyone else as *impersonal* Reason. Neither a human being as a rational being exists for the sake of anything else nor he possesses value in relation to anything else. Rather, he possesses supreme value as an end in itself, and all other things exist and possess value for the sake of him. This status of man entitles him to possess dignity. This Kantian conception of human dignity has been criticized by Scheler. He argues that the constancy of Reason inhabiting all human beings makes it impossible to distinguish them as individuals and make them a ‘thoroughfare’ for an *impersonal* rational activity. Scheler endows person with individually de-

termining factor which is revealed through his *contents* of experience, that is, what he thinks, wills, feels, etc. Further, the person in the Kantian scheme, being the logical principle of Reason, lacks any *material* contents of its own and thereby the person is reduced to the status of a *homo noumenon* which is indistinguishable from the things such as plant, rock, etc. And thus the person is banished to a realm that cannot be accessed by reflection and thereby deprived him of his unique identity and personal dignity.

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3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., pp. 106-7.
5. Kant, I. *Critique of Judgement*. Translated with Analytical Indexes by J. C. Meredith, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986.
6. Kant, I. *The Moral Law: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, op.cit. p. 113.
7. Ibid.
8. The technique of reduction is a part of the phenomenological method as developed by Edmund Husserl. It is used to keep all judgments concerning 'the natural thesis' including the psychophysical existence of the philosopher in abeyance while philosophizing, that is, to keep his way of reflection free from the influence of the naturalistic beliefs. It is also known the method of 'bracketing' or 'epoché'. Later, the members of the phenomenological movement have used this technique in their own unique ways in their phenomenology.
9. Scheler, M. *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values*, op.cit. p. 383.
10. Ibid., p. 371.
11. Ibid., pp. 372-73.