



Valuing Our Humanity

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Valuing Our Humanity¹

Christine M. Korsgaard

Harvard University

I. Introduction

In 1986, I published a paper on Kant's Formula of Humanity, the version of Kant's categorical imperative that commands us to treat every human being not merely as a means, but always also as an end in himself or herself.² In it, I claimed that Kant's argument for the value of humanity goes roughly like this: because we are rational, we cannot decide to pursue an end unless we take it to be good. Most of our ends, however, are simply the objects of our inclinations, and the objects of our inclinations are not, just as such, intrinsically valuable. So we need some further story about why we take them to be good. That further story is that we attribute to ourselves the power to confer value on our ends *by* rationally choosing them. In so doing, we attribute a fundamental kind of value to ourselves.³ We attribute value to our own humanity, a property which Kant

¹ An earlier version of this paper appeared in Spanish translation as "Valorar nuestra humanidad" in *Signos Filosóficos*, No. 26, 2011 and Portuguese translation as "Valorizar a nossa humanidade" in *Forma de Vida*, 2013. It is forthcoming in English in *Respect for Persons*, ed. Oliver Sensen and Richard Dean, and in a volume on the Principle of Humanity edited by César Barros Leal and Cancado Trindade from the Brazilian Institute of Human Rights.

² "Kant's Formula of Humanity," originally published in *Kant-Studien* 77 (1986): 183-202. Now available in Christine M. Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, pp. 106-132.

³ "Attribute value to ourselves" is deliberately ambiguous here. At the time I wrote the "Kant's Formula of Humanity," I was inclined to think of the argument as establishing that humanity has something like intrinsic value. Later I decided that on Kant's view, all value must be conferred by

identifies with our capacity to determine our ends through rational choice.⁴ I summed this all up by saying that humanity is the unconditioned condition of all value, and as such, it must be valued. I also argued that in various ways, the duties that Kant discusses in connection with the Formula of Humanity follow from the value we must set on what I then called our power of, or capacity for, rational choice.

Over the years, readers of that paper and of a later version of the argument that I used in *The Sources of Normativity*⁵ have expressed doubts about a number of points. For instance, they have not been able to see why it should follow from the fact that something is the condition of all value that it is valuable itself. And they have not been able to see why, even if that is so, an individual cannot just value *his own* humanity, rather than humanity in general. In recent years, I have added to the perplexity of my readers by arguing that it is an implication of Kant's Formula of Humanity that we must also value all animals,

valuing agents, or, to put it a different way, that valuing is prior to value. So as I now read the argument, its point is that valuing ourselves is a presupposition of valuing anything else. As I would now put it, in taking the things that are good *for* us to be good *absolutely* – good in the way that makes them worthy of rational pursuit – we express the value we necessarily place upon ourselves.

⁴ See for instance, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:437 and *The Metaphysics of Morals* 6:387 and 6:392. References to Kant's works will be inserted into the text, using the Academy volume and page numbers almost universally used in translations of his work. Where I quote Kant, I have used the translations by Mary Gregor in the Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy series.

⁵ Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*.. See especially §§3.4.6-3.4.9, pp. 118-123.

or all sentient beings, as ends in themselves.⁶ Surely, many people think, if what we value in ourselves is our capacity for rational choice, then we must conclude, as Kant himself did, that the other animals lack value, or have only such value as we confer upon them.

These objections raise important questions about what it means to value something. I now think that this is a notion whose complexities I have not been sufficiently attentive to in the past. For one thing, the value we set on different kinds of objects shows up in quite different kinds of attitudes and activities. The normal way that you show that you value people, for instance, is by conferring value on the objects of their choices or their interests.⁷ I would now appeal to that claim to answer one of the objections to my original argument – the objection that the fact that we confer value on the objects of our rational choices does not necessarily show that we set a value upon ourselves, because the condition of all value need not be taken to be valuable itself. I now think that in order to make that part of my argument, I do not need to defend the general thesis that if something is the condition of all value it must be taken to be valuable itself. Since what it means to value people is to confer value on the objects of their interests or choices, the fact that you confer value on the objects of your own

⁶ See Christine M. Korsgaard, "Fellow Creatures: Kantian Ethics and Our Duties to Animals," "Interacting with Animals: A Kantian Account," "A Kantian Case for Animal Rights," and "Kantian Ethics, Animals, and the Law." I give a sketch of it in Section IV, *Valuing Yourself as an End in Yourself*, below.

⁷ See also T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 105.

interests, for no further reason than that they are your interests, shows that you do set a value on yourself. In taking what is important to you to matter, to matter enough to determine the ends of your actions, you reveal the value that you necessarily set on yourself.

But what exactly are the implications of the value that we set upon ourselves? A certain kind of metaphysical realism about value suggests that to value something is to respond appropriately to the fact that it has value. Exactly which responses are appropriate depends on what sort of value it is. Value, so conceived, is a metaphysical property; valuing, the activity, is a response to that property.⁸ Because I reject that kind of realism, I think we should reverse the order of priority between value and valuing – that is, we should explain value in terms of valuing, rather than the reverse. But that leaves me with the task of explaining what valuing our humanity involves.

So my aim in this paper will be to take a closer look at what is involved in the idea of “valuing” something, and what Kant might mean when he claims that we both do and should value our humanity. In Section II, Valuing Morality, I will ask what is involved in valuing our moral nature, and in particular whether valuing our moral nature requires thinking of ourselves as in some way superior to non-moral animals. In Section III, Valuing People as Ends in Themselves, I will

⁸ The property might just be intrinsic value itself, as understood by G. E. Moore, or it might be the property of giving rise to reasons for action, on what T. M. Scanlon calls a “buck-passing” view. For Moore’s view, see his *Ethics* and “The Conception of Intrinsic Value.” For Scanlon’s view, see *What We Owe to Each Other*, Chapter 2.

consider two different interpretations of what is involved in valuing people as ends in themselves that both seem to be at work in Kant's own arguments, and propose a way to relate them. Finally, in Section IV, Valuing Yourself as an End in Yourself, I will describe a somewhat different sense of "End in Itself" in which each of us also takes herself or himself to be an End in Itself, one that I think has implications for the way we should regard the other animals.

II. Valuing Morality

Kant himself associates the value of humanity with our capacity for morality. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he says:

... morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, since only through this is it possible to be a lawgiving member in the kingdom of ends. (4:435)

Notice that it is a little unclear whether Kant is saying that a rational being can be an end in herself only if (or to the extent that) she realizes her moral capacity, or instead that only beings who have the capacity for morality can be ends in themselves. He clearly believes both, although the first claim – that a rational being can be an end in herself only if she realizes her moral capacity – must be understood in the light of another claim which Kant makes – namely, that we never can never be certain what anyone's fundamental (or noumenal) moral

disposition is.⁹ In other words, the claim that we realize our own value only through morality is not meant to imply that we are entitled to treat people whom we suppose have bad characters as mere means. It is meant to imply only that we must realize our own potential value by choosing morally. But suppose we understand the claim in the second way, as the claim that only beings with the capacity for morality can be ends in themselves. Should we agree with Kant about this?¹⁰

In some recent work, I have defended the traditional thesis that human beings are the only rational and therefore the only moral animals.¹¹ There are people who think that when you claim that only human beings are “moral animals,” you are claiming that human beings are especially noble or admirable in some way that makes us superior to the other animals. But when I claim that only human beings are “moral,” I do not mean that only human beings are morally *good*. I mean that only human beings can perform the kinds of actions that *can be* either morally good or bad. Human beings alone have the ability to reflect on the grounds of our actions, to determine whether those grounds constitute adequate reasons for action or not, and to act accordingly. To put it

⁹ See for example *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* 4:407.

¹⁰ I won’t actually answer this question until the Section IV; here I ask only whether the capacity makes human beings superior beings in some way.

¹¹ For my accounts of human/animal differences, see *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, especially Chapter 6; “The Activity of Reason,” §4, pp. 30-32; “Interacting with Animals: A Kantian Account,” § 6, pp. 100-103; and “Reflections on the Evolution of Morality,” especially §§ 4-5, pp. 16-23.

more simply, human beings alone have the capacity to act on what Kant called maxims or principles, and it is the character of our principles that renders our actions morally good or bad. So being a moral animal in this sense means being capable of being *either* morally good or morally evil.

Should we regard that – the capacity to choose in a way that is either good or evil – as a form of human superiority? Let me consider one argument that suggests that we should. “Substantive moral realists,” as I will call them, believe that moral obligations are grounded in mind-independent facts about reasons or values.¹² When we recognize these facts, they think, we are motivated to act in accordance with them. For such philosophers, the claim that the other animals are not moral would apparently have to mean that there is a dimension of reality, the moral dimension, to which non-human animals are insensitive, or to which they lack epistemic access. The other animals do not act morally because, as we might colloquially put it, they do not know any better. This raises an admittedly silly-sounding question. Is the realist committed to the view that the other animals actually have reasons to act morally, although due to their lack of awareness of that fact, they do not act on them?

Although the question sounds silly, there is an important philosophical issue behind it; namely, the issue of what we mean when we say that someone

¹² For characterizations of substantive realism and arguments against it see my *The Sources of Normativity*, Lecture One; *Self-Constitution*, §4.2, pp. 64-67; and “The Activity of Reason,” §§1-3, pp. 23-30.

“has a reason” to do something. What relation, exactly, is named by “have” in this context? Intuitively, it seems that we can speak intelligibly of what a non-human animal has reason to do. The antelope who is about to be attacked by the lion has a reason to run faster, say. Of course the antelope herself does not exactly know that. She knows “to run,” as we might put it, but not that she “has a reason to run.” But in the objective sense of “has a reason,” we can say that someone “has a reason” even when he does not know and could not know that he has that reason. By “the objective sense,” I mean the way we use the phrase “has a reason” when we say, for instance, that if right now the roof of the building we are in is about to cave in, we “have a reason” to leave the building, even if we do not know that. We are using “has a reason” in the “subjective sense,” by contrast, when we say, after the catastrophe, that because we did not know that the roof was about to cave in, we “had no reason” to leave the building.

The point I am making here actually depends on a slight extension of this familiar distinction, so I need to explain what this extension is and why I take it to be justified. The ordinary way of understanding the distinction between “objective” and “subjective” reasons relativizes a person’s subjective reasons to his beliefs about the facts. The question then arises whether we should also relativize a person’s reasons to his beliefs about reasons, that is, to his beliefs about what counts as a reason for what. When reasons are grounded in what have been traditionally regarded as the formal requirements of rationality, the

answer to that question seems plainly to be “no.” You have a subjective (as well as an objective) reason to, say, take the means to your ends, or to avoid believing contradictions, regardless of whether you believe in the principle of instrumental reason or in the law of non-contradiction or not. The familiar argument that the principles of logic cannot function as premises shows this. Suppose that George does not reason in accordance with modus ponens: he cannot see how you get from “if A then B” and “A” to the conclusion that “B.” It does not help to add modus ponens as a premise – that is, to add, “If A then B, and also A, then B” to George’s list of premises, for you still need to reason *in accordance* with modus ponens in order to get any conclusion from these premises, and that is what George does not do. So the formal requirements of rationality neither can nor need to function as premises.¹³ It seems natural to relativize our account of a person’s subjective reasons to what he must accept as a premise if he is to draw the conclusion that he has a reason. But substantive reasons that are not grounded in principles of rationality must be accepted as premises in our reasoning if they are to guide us at all. And many contemporary substantive realists suppose that most or all substantive reasons are independent of rational

¹³ See *Self-Constitution*, §4.2.4, p. 67; or, for an earlier version of the argument, “Skepticism about Practical Reason,” in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, especially §4, pp. 321-325. There I talk about whether the agent “cares” about, say, being prudent or taking the means, rather than whether the agent believes there is a reason to be prudent or take the means, but the argument is the same either way – the question is whether the force of these considerations depends on the agent’s contingent commitments or not.

requirements in this way.¹⁴ T. M. Scanlon, in particular, argues that we should regard all reasons that way, except possibly the reason that we have to make our attitudes conform to our own judgments about what we have reason to believe, do, or feel.¹⁵ So if we are going to appeal to the distinction between objective and subjective reasons, it would seem natural, on a view like Scanlon's, to take a person's subjective reasons to be relative to his beliefs about reasons themselves. And that means, to borrow an example from Scanlon, that someone who does not believe that "the fact that the car [he is driving] will injure and perhaps kill a pedestrian if the wheel is not turned" has no subjective reason to turn the wheel.¹⁶

¹⁴ For criticism of this view of substantive reasons, see my "The Activity of Reason," §3, pp. 26-30. The alternative to substantive realism about reasons is the view that all substantive reasons are identified by the application of the categorical imperative, or some other principle of formal rationality, to which an agent is committed by virtue of his rationality, regardless of his own explicit beliefs and commitments. In that case we need only relativize his subjective reasons to his knowledge of the non-normative facts.

¹⁵ See Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 25-32.

¹⁶ I borrow the example from Scanlon's *Being Realistic about Reasons*, p. 2. Actually, of course, the matter is a little more complicated, since if the person holds other beliefs about reasons from which this one follows, and we could therefore in principle convince him that this reason exists, there is still a sense in which he does have the reason, even subjectively. But in conversation Scanlon told me that he does not believe that all reasons are necessarily within the reach of argument in this way. For more on this point, see Scanlon's accounts of how we know which reasons we have (in *Being Realistic about Reasons*, Lecture 4, pp. 69-104, and in *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 64-72) and his discussion of Bernard Williams's defense of internalism about reasons (in the appendix to *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 363-373). Because of these kinds of complications, those who hold this sort of view characteristically reject the idea of a subjective reason altogether.

With that extension of the subjective/objective reason distinction in place, the question whether you have a certain reason, subjectively speaking, sometimes depends on whether you believe that that the reason itself exists. That makes it seem as if you can have reasons in the objective sense but not know it, because of your lack of knowledge about reasons themselves. So the claim I am envisioning would be that animals “have” moral reasons, objectively speaking, but fail to recognize that fact. But if the other animals have moral reasons but do not act on them, then perhaps we should think that there is a sense in which this makes them inferior to us, not blamably, of course, but in the way they are inferior in intelligence. There is something important about their own situation that they fail to grasp, and we do grasp that thing.

But at least some substantive moral realists would reject the view that their theory implies that the other animals have moral reasons but fail to realize that fact. The argument I just sketched depends on a certain conception of what realism involves. It depends on the idea that – objectively speaking – reasons are mind-independent entities or facts with intrinsic normative force. This in turn apparently implies that all that it means to say that you “have” a reason in the *objective* sense is that there is a reason about which you might possibly do something; and that therefore, all that it means to say that you “have” a reason in the *subjective* sense is that you are aware of this fact. The “having,” in so far as it is relational at all, is therefore a purely epistemic relation. Is the substantive

realist about reasons committed to all that? Thomas Nagel and T. M. Scanlon, to take two prominent examples, would both deny it.

I will have to fill in a little background to explain why. In *The View from Nowhere*, Nagel argues that objectivity is a matter of degree. You start from a conception of the world that is completely subjective in the sense that you take the world to be simply what it appears to you to be. You then form another conception of the world that is more objective because it includes you, facts about your position in the world, and the resulting facts about how the world appears to you, as among the facts that constitute the world. In your original subjective conception, tomatoes are red; in your more objective conception, it is also a fact that tomatoes look red to you. The claim that tomatoes are red, objectively speaking, is true to the extent that it survives into more objective conceptions, given the explanations of the appearances that are made possible by those conceptions. When the explanations are in, not all of the subjective appearances survive: some of them are dismissed as illusions.

The process of objectification that I have just described concerns our reasons for believing things, but Nagel thinks a parallel process can be constructed for identifying our objective reasons for doing things. Accordingly, Nagel thinks that we have objective practical reasons when something that appears to be a reason within our subjective point of view survives as such when we take up a more objective point of view that includes that appearance itself as a part of reality. When that happens, Nagel says:

The reasons are real, they are not just appearances. To be sure, they will be attributed only to a being that has, in addition to desires, a general capacity to develop an objective view about what it should do. Thus, if cockroaches cannot think about what they should do, there is nothing they should do.¹⁷

So on this view you “have” a reason in the objective sense only if you have a certain kind of subjectivity – the kind that allows for the development of an objective conception of the world.¹⁸

I think Nagel’s view raises a somewhat dizzying question: if something that is real exists only for someone who can form an objective conception of the subject matter in question, does objective reality exist only *for* such beings? Is there no distinction, for cockroaches, between the way they see the world, and the way the world is? In fact, there is a way to block this odd implication, but it draws our attention to an important disanalogy which the realist must posit between theoretical and practical reasons. To block the implication, Nagel could

¹⁷ Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 150.

¹⁸ It is unclear what the implications of this view are for animals with who have more sophisticated forms of cognition than we suppose cockroaches do, but who do not think about reasons. It depends on what counts as “an ability to think about what one should do.” For instance, suppose that an animal has a capacity for envisioning future consequences that sometimes modifies his desires, not because he applies some principle or does some reasoning, but causally – he responds to what he envisions happening to him in the future. Suppose the animal also has the habit of envisioning future consequences so that he is often effectively prudent. Does that count as “thinking about what he should do”?

point out that he need not deny that objective reality exists for the cockroach; he need only deny that the cockroach has any reason to believe anything.¹⁹ The proper analogy, he could insist, is between reasons for action and reasons for belief. But then it immediately becomes clear that the realist is committed to the view that practical reality is wholly constituted by reasons for action, while theoretical reality plainly is not wholly constituted by reasons for belief. To put it another way, realists about reasons must suppose that an action that is supported by practical reasons is therefore everything that it should be, while a belief that is supported by theoretical reasons is not therefore everything that it should be. Beliefs must also be true, and being supported by reasons does not guarantee that they are.^{20,21} This suggests, although obscurely, that “having a

¹⁹ Nagel asserts that “it is beliefs and attitudes that are objective in the primary sense.” *The View from Nowhere*, p. 4.

²⁰ For more discussion of this disanalogy see my “The Activity of Reason,” §2, pp. 25-26; for an account of why a constructivist need not accept the disanalogy, see §§6-7, pp. 35-39.

²¹ Nagel has another route to the claim that some reasons “belong” to certain individuals. In *The View from Nowhere*, Chapter 9, he argues that some reasons are agent-relative – that is, they have normative force only for the person whose desires or whose condition gives rise to them. I suppose you might think that the agent-relative reasons are “had” by individuals in a special sense. But that is not the sense we are looking for here: that sense supports a contrast between the reasons that everyone has and the reasons that only some people have, without telling us what it is for any of us to “have” or lack a reason at all.

The idea that reasons originate from the desires or the condition of particular beings suggests yet another sense in which reasons are “had” by individuals: the reasons that originate in something about my desires or my condition might be thought to be in some special sense mine, even if they are agent-neutral and so give rise to reasons for others. I explore this idea and draw attention to the difficulties of pinning it down in *Self-Constitution*, §9.5, pp. 197-200.

reason" in the practical sense is really something quite different from "having a reason" in the theoretical sense. Having a reason in the practical sense is having got hold of a bit of reality, while having a reason in the theoretical sense is more like having a clue.

Scanlon, on the other hand, holds the view that reasons are relational. A reason, according to Scanlon, is a four-place relation $[R(p, x, c, a)]$, which holds when a consideration, p , is a reason for an agent x , in certain circumstances, c , to do a certain action, a .²² This formulation is intended to block the implication that "having" a reason is just, so to speak, knowing that one that you might possibly do something about is out there. As Scanlon says:

If we take the basic normative claims to be apparently non-relational claims that these things "are reasons," or similarly apparently non-relational claims that certain things "are good," the question then naturally arises what these normative facts have to do with *us*. (This puzzlement lies behind Christine Korsgaard's caricature when she says that according to a realist view we notice reasons "as it were, wafting by.") The idea that the basic elements of the normative domains are relations avoids this puzzlement.²³

²² Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, p. 31.

²³ Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, p. 120. The passage Scanlon quotes from me is from *The Sources of Normativity*, §1.4.8, p. 44.

Scanlon's view makes the reasons relative to agents by definition. Do animals have them? In personal conversation, Scanlon said that he thinks animals have reasons in two senses: first, there is a point of view, defined by their interests, relative to which there is some reason to prefer some things to others; and second, they consciously act in pursuit of things that are often in their interests. But animals do not have reasons in the strongest sense implied by being able to think about or see them.²⁴ Animals, it appears, have reasons in this lesser sense to do what is in their interests, but they do not have moral reasons.

In connection with this, it is important to note that Scanlon has another resource for denying that animals have moral reasons, even though he grants that they do in a sense have practical reasons. On Scanlon's view, we have moral reasons because we have reasons to want to be able to justify our actions to each other, and we have those because we have reasons to want to be in unity with others. The kind of unity he has in mind is the kind that we have when we treat one another with respect, making human friendship and other essentially human relations possible.²⁵ Morality, to put it succinctly, is therefore a part of our good. Since the other animals do not act on principle, questions of justification do not

²⁴ This resembles Nagel's view: in this "strongest sense" whether you have reasons depends on whether you could know that you have them. Scanlon says that he does not object to mind-dependence in this form.

²⁵ See *What We Owe to Each Other*, especially pp. 160-168. I do not mean to deny that the other animals have friendships, but those do not require mutual respect in quite the same way that human friendships do.

come up for them; so being in *that* kind of unity with others is no part of their good. Non-human animals therefore do not have moral reasons. So both Nagel and Scanlon would deny that their view implies that non-human animals “have” moral reasons even though they do not know that.

I believe that each of these views gets part of the story right. What I think they both get wrong is that they locate the normativity of reasons in something objective, whether it is a relation or a fact. And I believe that, because I believe that what Nagel gets *right* is that whether you have reasons *at all* depends not on what is out there in the world, but on what sort of subjectivity you have. Reasons exist in the first instance in the deliberative perspective itself. But the kind of subjectivity that is needed is not the capacity to form an objective conception of your reasons: it is rather the kind that Kant associated with autonomy, the capacity to make a law for yourself. The essential element of a reason is its normativity, and its normativity for you rests in the fact that you legislate acting on it as a law. What I think Scanlon gets right is the claim that animals do in a sense have reasons, but that those are determined by their interests, not by moral considerations. As I argued in *Self-Constitution*, there is a sense in which animals are autonomous, since their instincts are the laws of their own nature, and so when they follow their instincts, they are laws to themselves.²⁶ So there is a sense in which they have reasons. But their instincts concern only their own

²⁶ See *Self-Constitution*, §5.6, pp. 104-108.

good. This may extend to the good of their offspring and sometimes to the good of their group, but it does not extend to anything that looks like general moral reasons.

The foregoing dialectic has been a little complicated, so let me remind you why I was discussing these questions. I was examining the question whether the bare capacity for morality should be regarded as form of human superiority. I had proposed that perhaps a realist about moral reasons is committed to the view that it is, because such a realist is committed to thinking that there is some important feature of the world, relevant to the actions of both people and the other animals, that we grasp but that the other animals do not. There are moral reasons for doing things, and the other animals fail to respond to those reasons. I examined Nagel and Scanlon's views because Nagel and Scanlon are examples of realists who would deny that their view has this odd implication. Although they think that reasons are mind-independent facts, they also think that only people "have" moral reasons.

If we suppose that morality is grounded in human nature, rather than in objective features of reality, we can make a simpler argument against regarding the bare capacity for moral action (morally good or bad action) as a form of human superiority. This is true whether we ground morality in our rational nature, as Kant did, or in our sentimental nature, along with Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith, and their descendants, Allan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn. According to all such theories, morality is something like the proper

use or perfection of a distinctively human attribute, and since the other animals lack that attribute, the standards defining its proper use or perfection are simply irrelevant to them. Kant's view illustrates the point. I am counting Kant's view as grounding morality in human nature, because, as I said a moment ago, Kant grounds morality in a feature of human subjectivity. That is the form of self-consciousness that makes us capable of assessing the grounds of our beliefs and actions, determining whether those grounds count as good grounds or not, and issuing laws to ourselves accordingly. This form of self-consciousness makes possible a distinct form of agency, rational agency, that the other animals do not share. Morality is the perfection of that form of agency, and as such, represents a standard that does not apply to the other animals.

Of course, agency in general is an attribute we share with the other animals. It is arguable that there is a sense in which the human form of agency, rational agency, is superior considered just as a form of agency. What I have in mind is this: Agency is a kind of control. To be an agent is to be able to move under the control of your own mind. One might argue that an agent who can reflect on and evaluate the grounds of her own actions has more control than one who cannot do that. There is a dimension along which we might judge ourselves superior. But having this additional form of control is not, in and of itself, a virtue. Nor, as many thinkers have pointed out, is it obviously a blessing – something prizeworthy rather than praiseworthy, as Aristotle might say.

These claims are not uncontroversial, of course. David Hume and the other sentimentalists believed that our moral nature is prizable, in the sense that we are the happier for having it and acting in accordance with it. He also believed that, because the moral sense approves of anything that tends to make people happy, the moral sense can therefore approve of itself. So on Hume's view, just being a moral being apparently turns out to be a kind of virtue after all, or at any rate, something morally good.²⁷ But of course it is one thing to argue that a rational and social animal would be deformed without morality, and another to say that a different kind of animal altogether – say a tiger – would be either better, or better off, if she were moral.

I think there is a reason why these claims seem so odd. The question of the value of being moral – and now I mean mainly in the prizable rather than the praiseworthy sense – is one of a nest of what I think are rather interesting questions that arise once we take seriously an idea that I think we should take seriously – namely, the idea that the good for a thing is relative to its nature. Just to give you an example of what I have in mind: John Stuart Mill famously

²⁷ The views of Hume to which I am referring here can be found primarily in the conclusion of Book III of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, especially pp. 619-620, and in Part II of the conclusion of *The Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, pp. 278-284. The remarks in the text summarize an interpretation of Hume that I spell out in *The Sources of Normativity*, §§2.2.1-2.2.7, pp. 51-66.

claimed that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.²⁸ Mill believed this because he believed that it is good for human beings that we have access to what he called “higher pleasures,” like, for instance, the pleasure of poetry. But for whom is it better? Would it be better *for the pig* if he were Socrates? Why exactly would that be? Temple Grandin, in her book *Animals Make Us Human*, reports that there is nothing pigs love more than rooting around in straw.²⁹ Poetry is not good for a pig, so it is not something valuable that is missing from the pig’s life, that he would get access to if he were changed into Socrates, any more than rooting around in straw is something valuable that is missing from your life, and that you would get access to if you were changed into a pig. But isn’t poetry a higher pleasure than rooting around in straw? If what makes a pleasure “higher” is, as Kant and others have suggested, that it cultivates our capacity for the even deeper and greater pleasant activities of that very kind,³⁰ then we must have that capacity before the pleasure can be judged a higher one for us. Since the pig lacks that capacity, poetry is not a higher

²⁸ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 2. Actually he claims, on p. 10, that it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, and better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied, so I am merging his claims, by taking Socrates as the exemplar of humanity here.

²⁹ Temple Grandin reports that: “Pigs are obsessed with straw. When I threw a few flakes of wheat straw into my pen of piglets, they rooted in it at a furious pace... So far, no one has found anything that can compete with straw for a pig’s interest and attention.” In *Animals Make Us Human: Creating the Best Life for Animals*, pp. 185-186.

³⁰ Kant says: “we correctly call these joys and delights more refined because they are more under our control than others, do not wear out but rather strengthen feeling for further enjoyment of them...” *The Critique of Practical Reason* 5:24.

pleasure for a pig. Of course, we might try the argument that, so far as we can tell, none of the pig's pleasures are "higher" in this sense. But then perhaps it is only for us jaded human beings that the lower pleasures seem to grow stale. So long as the straw itself is fresh, pigs apparently *never* lose their enthusiasm for rooting around in straw.

I believe that this point about the essentially relational nature of the good generalizes to other standards: it does not make sense to judge human beings either superior to the other animals or better off than they are by standards that only apply to human beings. But if we decide it does not make sense to say it would be better for the pig if he were Socrates, does that mean we have to give up valuing our own ability to appreciate poetry? And – by the same token – can we value our own moral nature, either as something praiseworthy or as something prizeworthy, without thinking that a pig would be better, or perhaps better off, if he had a moral nature too?

This question brings us back to the issues with which I began. In "Kant's Formula of Humanity" and in *The Sources of Normativity*, I argued that there is a sense in which we must value our moral nature. In *The Sources of Normativity*, in particular, I argued that we must value our moral nature as what I call a form of practical identity, a description under which we value ourselves and find our lives worth living. The argument goes roughly like this: You affirm your value as the bearer of a practical identity whenever you act on the reasons to which it gives rise. But our moral nature – our capacity to give ourselves laws – is the

source of the normative force of all of our reasons.³¹ It is what enables us to “legislate” those reasons to ourselves. So whenever you act on a reason, you affirm your value as a moral being. But how can we value our moral nature if we can think neither that it is praiseworthy nor that it is prizeworthy to have a moral nature?

The answer is that it does not follow from the rejection of Mill’s argument that we cannot value our moral nature. When we say that we value something, there are different things that we might mean. One is that we place it within a domain to which we think evaluative standards importantly apply – let me call that an “evaluable domain.” In that sense, the value we set on poetry is expressed just as much in our disdain for doggerel as it is in our admiration for Dickinson or Donne. A second sense in which we value something, of course, is when we have a positive attitude towards some item because it meets the standards of some evaluable domain within which it falls.

Valuing in the first sense, that is, placing something in an evaluable domain, is not merely a matter *believing* that the items in question are subject to an evaluative standard, but rather requires taking that standard to be normative for yourself in some active way. Someone could believe that a certain performance of, say, ballet or boxing is the sort of thing that can be good or bad of its kind, and not care at all about it, in the sense that there is no imaginable

³¹ *The Sources of Normativity*, §3.4.

circumstance in which he would act differently because of that value. But exactly *how* you take the standard to be normative for you depends both on the nature of the object and on your relationship to it. The value you set on poetry might be expressed in activities of writing it, reading it, appreciating it, reviewing it – including writing scathing reviews of the doggerel – or making sure that the great poems of the past get preserved. But the value you set on poetry does not require you to consider it to be superior to say, prose, or music. And in the same way, the value we set on the life lived under the government of moral values does not require us to think that the life lived under the government of instinct and sensation is an inferior form of life.

A moment ago I mentioned my argument that we value our moral nature as a form of practical identity. It is written into the very notion of practical identity that you value forms of practical identity by living up to the standards that they set for you. So to value your moral nature, that is, your practical identity as a moral being, is to think it all-important that you live up to the standards that it sets for you, moral standards. In that sense, you can value your moral nature, without thinking that you are a very fine fellow just for *having* it, just as a man can place a high value on his role as a father, without thinking badly of men who are not fathers. Of course once something falls within an evaluable domain, we value it in the second sense when it meets the standards of that domain, and disapprove of it when it does not. Here, of course, there is room for a thought about superiority: a good human being is, in a recognizable

sense, superior to a bad one. So we do disapprove of *bad* fathers, even though we do not disapprove of men for not being fathers, just as we disapprove of people who do not live up to the standards implicit in their moral identity.

So one way in which we value our humanity or moral nature, then, is by seeing our actions as falling within an evaluable domain, and treating that fact as normative, by living up to the standards that apply to them. But that way of valuing our moral nature does not commit us to thinking either that we are superior to the other animals, or that we are blessed in comparison with them. It commits us to caring about whether we are good, to admiring good moral people for their goodness, and thinking badly of human beings, ourselves included, when we go wrong. But it does not imply any particular attitude at all about the value of non-moral beings.

But valuing our moral nature in this sense clearly is not all there is to valuing our humanity. The argument for the Formula of Humanity itself turns on a different sense in which Kant invites us value our humanity. But this sense turns out to require some further distinctions, to which I now turn.

III. Valuing People as Ends in Themselves

When we say we value humanity, in the sense involved in Kant's argument, we are using "value" in a somewhat different sense from those I have distinguished so far. Sometimes valuing something has nothing to do with placing it within an evaluable domain: it just has to do with treating it as

normative in some positive way, as making some kind of a claim on you. This notion of “valuing” is unfortunately rather obscure, since there are many different positive actions and attitudes, and it is not clear which ones you are required to have or to do in order to count as valuing something. The only thing that seems to be clear is that, as I said before, there has to be some imaginable circumstance in which you would act differently because of the value. Anyway, as I said earlier, valuing people – and valuing the other animals – is like this: to value people is to take up some sort of positive stance towards their interests or the objects of their choices. Valuing people involves promoting their interests or respecting their choices, where we do that either by promoting the objects of those choices or simply by refraining from interference. In “Kant’s Formula of Humanity” I tried to express this idea by saying that, in taking your own choices to confer value on the objects of those choices, you are in effect setting a kind of value on the power of rational choice itself. But in fact there are (at least) two different ways in which we might understand what that involves. Interestingly, if a little awkwardly, both of them show up in the casuistical arguments that Kant uses to illustrate the moral implications of the Formula of Humanity.

To show you what I have in mind, I want to recall a familiar objection to Kant’s argument. People sometimes ask: why couldn’t I just value *my own* humanity? Even if the fact that I pursue my own ends shows that I value my own power of rational choice, what commits me to valuing that of others? This objection is based on the idea that when Kant talks about humanity being an end

in itself, he is just talking about “humanity” or “the power to determine ends” as a property on which we set a high value, in the sense that we care about having that property, or think it worth preserving, or wish to develop it in appropriate ways, and so forth. But I now think Kant means something a little different. He means that we regard humanity or the power to determine ends as a property that confers a certain kind of normative standing, and with it certain normative powers, on the being who has it.

I am going to call these two things the “valuable property view” and the “normative standing view.” To see the difference, let us consider some examples. First of all, suppose your intelligence is a property on which you set a high value. Then you might do things to protect it, like not taking drugs that cause brain damage, or you might do things to develop it, like solving mathematical problems. If you regard your intelligence as a valuable property, it at least seems conceivable that you could value your own intelligence in this way, without caring about anyone else’s.³²

³² Actually, I think there is some room for doubt even about that – and this is one of the places that the obscurity of this conception of valuing shows up. The doubt is about whether you could value your own intelligence, without valuing intelligence as such. At least if we assume that we are talking about someone who values his own intelligence not for the sake of something else that it gives him, but for its own sake, it might seem as if he must at least *appreciate* the operation of intelligence when he witnesses it in others even if he would do nothing to preserve or protect or develop it in others. People who preen themselves on their intelligence or their looks may be jealous of these properties in others, but they still seem to appreciate these properties in others. A character in Jane Austen’s novel *Persuasion*, Sir Walter Elliot, preens himself on being handsome, and it goes with this that he always notices the looks of others, is inclined to like people who are

But now suppose you ask me, “In virtue of what do you have the right to vote here?” and I reply, “I am a citizen of this nation.” Citizenship, as I understand it, is a form of normative standing: it gives its possessor certain normative or moral powers. You might reply, “Well, I am a citizen too, so I have the right to vote here as well.” Notice that it would not make sense for me to respond, “no, *my own* citizenship has that normative implication – but so far as I am concerned, yours does not.” Kant’s argument for the Formula of Humanity, treats humanity, or the power of rational choice, as if conferred a kind of normative standing on us. When we look at the argument this way, Kant asks, “in virtue of what do we have the right to treat our ends as good, that is, to confer normative value on them, and so in effect to legislate values?” and he answers, “Our humanity.” So the argument assigns us a normative standing in virtue of our humanity, like the normative standing we have in virtue of say, being born in a certain country. In fact that analogy is exact: Kant thinks our humanity makes us legislators in the Kingdom of Ends. Although Kant’s way of putting this is to say that we should value our own humanity as an end, I think we should not read him as saying that we should value the property of humanity or rationality in the way the person in my example values her intelligence. We

good looking and look down on those who are not, and evens manages to find people better looking when they are otherwise in his good graces. Valuing his own good looks inclines him to value good looks in others.

should read him as saying that we should respect the normative standing people have in virtue of their humanity.

There are two reasons why I think we should understand Kant in this way. The more obvious one is that merely saying that the ability to determine our ends through reason is a valuable property would do nothing whatever to explain why we take our ends themselves to be valuable. And that is the question from which I believe the argument for the Formula of Humanity starts – why do we take the objects of our inclinations to be good? And this brings me to the second reason, which is textual. Kant's answer begins:

... rational nature exists as an end in itself. The human being necessarily represents his own existence this way; so far it is thus a *subjective* principle of human action. (4:429)

As I read the argument, what Kant means when he says that we “represent ourselves” as ends in ourselves is that we take our ends to be good in spite of the fact that they are not intrinsically good. In so doing, we show that we regard ourselves as ends. Kant then continues:

But every other rational being also represents his existence in this way consequent on just the same rational ground that also holds for me;* thus it is at the same time an *objective* principle... (4:429)

The asterisk marks a footnote to the phrase “on the same rational ground that holds also for me” in which Kant says:

*Here I put forward this proposition as a postulate. The grounds for it will be found in the last Section. (4:429n)

I assume that what is relevant about the last section, *Groundwork* III, is its introduction of the conception of ourselves as members of an intelligible world that, as Kant says, gives the law to the world of sense (4:453-454). In that case, the footnote claims that the “rational ground” of our representation of ourselves as ends in ourselves is our conception of our rational wills as “legislative” (that is, normative) for what we do, and also, insofar as it is up to us, for what happens, in the world of sense. Each of us claims the standing of a legislator in the Kingdom of Ends, with a right to vote on what is going to happen, which we exercise whenever we make a choice.

Obviously, there are many concerns one might raise about the workability of this argument. But if Kant intended the argument in the way I have suggested, the claim that we are ends in ourselves is not the claim that the power of rational choice is a valuable property; it is the claim that in virtue of the power of rational choice, we assign ourselves a normative standing – the standing to legislate the value of our own actions and ends. That commits us to assigning the same standing to every other rational being, and so to respecting his choices, and helping him to pursue his ends.

But there is a problem with reading the argument this way. The problem is that in some of his casuistical arguments, Kant argues as if we must *also* treat the power of rational choice as a valuable property. The two different

conceptions of an end-in-itself both appear in the casuistical arguments. The two cases that Kant uses to exemplify our duties to others – the duty to help others, or promote their ends, and the duty not to make a lying promise – can best be explained on the normative standing view. We must promote the ends of others in recognition of the fact that they, like ourselves, have the standing to confer value on their chosen ends. We must avoid all use of force, coercion, and deception as forms of interference with the efforts of others to exercise their legislative rights.³³ Force is like depriving someone of his vote; coercion and deception are like tampering with his ballot. But when Kant turns to the duties to the self, the considerations he urges are most naturally understood as springing from the thought that the power of rational choice is a valuable property. We are to develop our talents and powers as aids to rational choice; we are to avoid alcohol and drugs, according Kant's argument in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, because they incapacitate us for rational action. These duties seem to have nothing to do with our standing; they are the attitudes and actions of someone who regards rational choice as a valuable property.³⁴ Kant finds it

³³ I argue that avoiding the use of force, coercion, and deception are central to Kant's conception of perfect duties to other in "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil" in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, pp. 137-140.

³⁴ The difficulty about making the right sort of argument for the duties to the self under the Formula of Humanity parallels a difficulty Kant finds in arguing for these duties under the Formula of Universal Law. When arguing for these duties under the Formula of Universal Law, Kant takes refuge in teleological arguments: suicide is against the natural purpose of self-love;

obvious that committing suicide is treating yourself as a mere means, but if we understand the claim that humanity is valuable as the claim that it confers a normative standing, it is really not clear why this should be so. Why shouldn't a human being have the standing to confer value on her own demise, as well as on anything else she desires, provided that no other duty is breached? Kant is thinking of suicide simply as throwing something valuable away. That is a thought about the value of your humanity as a property, not a thought about your standing.

If we adopt the view that valuing humanity actually means regarding it as the source of a normative standing, not regarding it merely as a valuable property, must we give up the claim that these duties to the self exist? I do not think that we must. I do not wish to defend Kant's prohibition of suicide, but I think the other duties to the self can be saved. The two ways of thinking about the value of humanity that I have distinguished may be combined if we suppose that we are to regard our normative standing *itself* as the valuable property in question. If my own argument that we must regard our moral nature as a form of practical identity works, then that is exactly what we should do. What it means to have a practical identity is not just to value oneself as the possessor of a property, but rather to value oneself in the performance of a role. So we should value our human identity, not merely as rational beings, but as legislators in the

our talents and powers are "given to us" for all sorts of possible purposes. (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* 4:422-423).

Kingdom of Ends. In that case, developing your talents and powers is like taking care that you are a well-informed voter; avoiding excess alcohol and drugs is like not going drunk to the polls. These duties are expressions of respect, not for the property of rationality, but for the legislative standing that it confers upon us. They express the value that we set upon the role that our rationality gives us.

IV. Valuing Yourself as an End in Yourself

I think that Kant must have had something like this – that we value our own normative standing as a form of practical identity – in mind. But even so, there is something that it leaves out. Earlier I pointed out that Kant’s answer to the question why we take our ends to be good begins this way:

... rational nature exists as an end in itself. The human being necessarily represents his own existence this way; so far it is thus a *subjective* principle of human action. (4:429)

I claimed that what Kant means when he says that we “represent ourselves” as ends in ourselves is that we take our ends to be good in spite of the fact that they are not intrinsically good, and that in so doing, we show that we regard ourselves as ends in ourselves.

I want to unpack this a little now. I believe this “representation” manifests itself in two different ways, but that Kant only takes notice of one of them. The one he does take notice of is that it involves a claim we make on rational agents. When we choose an end we expect others to respect that pursuit – not to interfere

with our actions, and even to help us to pursue our ends when we are in need. So we claim a normative standing with respect to others. We also in effect claim a normative standing with respect to ourselves, since our choices are commitments which may extend into the future. This is easiest to see in the case of a long term project. If I decide to write a book, say, I commit myself to working on the book in the future, on some schedule that will make it possible to finish. I commit myself to staying on that schedule, even if it sometimes involves working on the book when I would prefer to be doing something else. In that sense, I make a law for my future self which holds categorically – that is, it binds her in spite of her desires. Of course I can always change my mind about whether the effort is worth it, but even so I have made a law for myself, for in order to drop the project I do have to change my mind about whether it is worth doing – it is not enough that I just don't feel like it. So when we make choices we make laws for all rational agents, in so doing, we are claiming our standing as legislators in the Kingdom of Ends.

But the representation of ourselves as ends-in-ourselves also involves another claim we make both for, and on, ourselves: the claim that what matters to us, what is good for us, *is* to be treated as good absolutely. This is a claim, that, in the first instance, we make on ourselves, not by virtue of the implications of our choices – the way they bind ourselves and others – but simply by virtue of their content. After all, your legislative standing gives you a right to “vote for” – that is confer value on – anything whatever; it does not have to be on the

satisfaction of your own natural desires and needs. But Kant took it for granted that what we do choose, at least when morality permits it, is to satisfy our natural desires and interests, and the natural desires and interests and needs of those whom we love. We choose the things that are good from our own point of view. This involves a different sense of being an end-in-yourself than having a normative standing in the realm of rational beings. It is the claim that we are ends in ourselves in the simple sense that the things that are good for us are therefore good absolutely.

That this is a different sense of being an end-in-yourself shows up in the fact that it operates at a different “moment” in the act of choice. Your claim to be an end-in-itself in the sense of a being with normative standing operates once you have made a choice, in the implications you take that choice to have for yourself and others, the way it binds you and others. The idea that you are an end-in-itself in the sense of a being whose good matters absolutely is what guides your own choice in the first place. So the sense in which the conception of ourselves as ends in ourselves is a subjective principle of rational action is twofold. Rational action embodies the thought that we are ends in ourselves in the sense that our choices have the status of laws for ourselves and others. But it also embodies the thought that our own natural interests are worth conferring value *on*.

I do not believe that this sense of being an end in itself is one we assign to ourselves merely as rational beings. Only rational beings must claim this status

for ourselves, for of course only rational beings both can and must think about whether the ends they pursue are good absolutely. But it does not follow that the status we claim *applies* only to rational beings. Nor is that the obvious way to take it – as a sort of claim that the natural interests of rational beings are good. After all, in pursuing our own good and that of those whom we love, we are simply doing rationally what every animal does naturally. And many of the interests on which we confer value when we claim this status are natural interests that we share with our fellow creatures – our interest in freedom from suffering, in the satisfaction of our natural needs, in the enjoyment of our physical lives, and in the welfare of our offspring. I believe in pursuing our natural good in this way we confer value on our status as beings who have a good, beings who have interests. That is a status we share with the other animals, who then also must be regarded as ends in themselves.³⁵

Valuing our humanity, I conclude, involves a number of different things. It involves prizing our moral nature, not in the sense of congratulating ourselves upon it, but in the sense of taking the standards it sets for us seriously, and doing whatever we can to live up to them. It involves respecting the rational choices of other people, and making ourselves fit for the normative standing it confers on us, by developing and preserving our rational powers. And it also involves, quite

³⁵ This claim obviously has enormous implications which I cannot explore here. I give a more detailed version of the argument and consider some of its implications in *Fellow Creatures*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

simply, caring about ourselves and each other, not only as rational but as natural beings, whose interests we declare, through our moral legislation, to be worthy of realization, promotion, and pursuit. But it does not involve considering ourselves superior to other living beings, or require us to limit our moral concern to human beings alone. In fact, there is no better way of expressing the value we set on our humanity, and especially on our own moral nature, than by extending the reach of our moral concern beyond the boundaries of humanity itself.

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