

Glasgow's Conception of Kantian Humanity

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ABSTRACT: In "Kant's Conception of Humanity," Joshua Glasgow defends a traditional reading of the humanity formulation of the Categorical Imperative. Specifically, he opposes taking good will to be the end in itself, and instead argues that the end in itself must be some more minimal "rational capacity." Most of Glasgow's article is directed against some arguments I have given in favor of taking the end in itself to be a good will, or the will of a rational being who is committed to morality. In this response to Glasgow, I both consider Glasgow's main points, and propose some general strategies for avoiding common interpretive pitfalls in discussing the humanity formulation.

In "Kant's Conception of Humanity," Joshua Glasgow defends a traditional reading of the humanity formulation of the Categorical Imperative.¹ Specifically, he opposes taking good will to be the end in itself, and instead argues that the end in itself must be some more minimal "rational capacity."

Most of Glasgow's article is directed against some arguments I have given in favor of taking the end in itself to be a good will, or the will of a rational being who is committed to morality.² I will respond to some of Glasgow's counterarguments here, but I also will use the opportunity to suggest some more general interpretive points that I think are useful for further discussions of the humanity formulation.

Glasgow devotes most of his attention to the implications of two of Kant's basic claims about value, that only a good will is good without qualification and that only humanity is an end in itself. I have argued that the two claims are making essentially the same point using different terminology. That is, anything that is an end in itself also is good without qualification, and anything that is good without qualification also is an end in itself, so good will and humanity are identical. An end in itself, according to Kant, has an "absolute value" or a value for every agent, regardless of her inclinations.³ But if something is valuable for everyone, regardless of inclinations, then it must be valuable in all possible circumstances, according to Kant. It is only

our particular psychological differences that lead us to desire and seek different objects, and so if we exclude these differences, then each person's power of reason will tell her to seek to preserve, cultivate and respect the same thing. This one thing is the end in itself. Then the end in itself will have value in all possible circumstances or conditions. But this is just what it means to be good without qualification—to be valuable in all possible circumstances.⁴ So to say that humanity is an end in itself implies that it also is good without qualification. Working from the other direction, something good without qualification also must have absolute value and so must be an end in itself. Given Kantian background claims, if something is valuable in all possible circumstances then its value must not depend on inclination. This is because inclinations can vary from person to person, and so it is at least theoretically possible that there will be a circumstance in which no one has the inclinations that make a given object valuable. The only way in which something can be necessarily valuable under all conditions is if its value does not depend on inclination. So if something is good without qualification, then it also must have absolute value, and so must be an end in itself. So, I argue, something is good without qualification if and only if it is an end in itself. Since a good will is the only thing good without qualification, and humanity is the only thing that is an end in itself, good will and humanity must be equivalent.

Glasgow accepts half of the biconditional, the half asserting that something good without qualification must be an end in itself. But he rejects the claim that something that is an end in itself must be good without qualification. He does this by proposing that the value possessed by humanity, the end in itself, is of a fundamentally different type than the value possessed by a good will, which is good in all possible circumstances. Humanity has what Glasgow calls "moral status," which Glasgow takes to be a kind of value, but it "does not have any kind of goodness."⁵ On Glasgow's reading, goodness "is a subset of value," and to call something good is to say it is something that "we want to preserve, promote, or otherwise bring about."⁶ Humanity, in contrast, is an "independently existing end" and not something to bring about.⁷ By placing the unqualified value of a good will in a different category of value from the absolute value of humanity,

Glasgow creates the conceptual space to deny that something valuable independent of inclination also must be valuable in all possible circumstances. Using the conceptual space he has created, Glasgow concludes that any being with minimal “rational capacity” is an end in herself. Someone with a good will also is an end in herself, because possessing a minimal “rational capacity” is a necessary condition for having a good will. But having a good will is not a necessary condition for being an end in oneself. In effect, all wills are ends in themselves, including but not limited to good wills.

The general view here may seem like an appealing reconciliation of the claims that only good will is good without qualification and that only humanity is an end in itself. If taken just as a freestanding claim, it seems plausible enough to say that all “rational capacity” has value, and that people with good will are just a subset of beings who are ends in themselves because of their rational capacity. But the claim loses much of its appeal when Kant’s two value claims are examined within the larger framework of the text of *Groundwork*, and of Kant’s general ideas about value. Glasgow devotes a good deal of space to showing that it is plausible in its own right to draw a conceptual distinction between value as moral status and value as goodness, but presents significantly less evidence that Kant himself employs such a distinction.

The text of *Groundwork* strongly suggests that Kant is not attributing fundamentally different kinds of value to good will and to humanity. Glasgow admits that “Kant does not clearly and explicitly *tell us* that he has such a distinction in mind,” but this is an understatement.⁸ Kant freely interchanges attributions of the same type of value to good will and to humanity. Although Kant unsurprisingly uses the word “good” (*Gut*) to describe the moral goodness of a good will, and sometimes to say that it is good (as valuable) without qualification, he also repeatedly uses the German *der Wert* to describe the good will’s value. English translations of *Groundwork* all seem to alternate between translating *der Wert* as simple “value” and the potentially more morally laden “worth,” but it is the same word in German. Kant attributes unconditional *Wert* to a good will throughout the opening paragraphs of *Groundwork*, saying that it has unconditional value, that it has its full value “in itself,” and that it has absolute

value.⁹ Then in the discussion leading to the claim that humanity is an end in itself, Kant similarly says that the end in itself must have an absolute and unconditional value (*Wert*), instead of a relative and conditional value.¹⁰ In addition, Kant says that only one thing has dignity, or incomparably high worth, and he attributes this unique and incomparable value to both good will and to the end in itself.¹¹

But someone might rightly point out that in *Groundwork*, Kant's conception of value is still emerging, and from this might conclude that the more mature account of value in *Critique of Practical Reason* and *The Metaphysics of Morals* provides support for attributing conceptually distinct types of value to good will and humanity. The truth, however, is quite the opposite. Kant's mature conception of value allows a unified account of different types of value, by taking all value to depend on the choices that rational agents would make. Kant identifies that which is valuable as "the object of practical reason," meaning that rational choice is not just a response to pre-existing value, but that talk about value is just a way of capturing the conceptually prior idea of the choices that a rational person would make.¹² The clearest exposition of Kant's conception of value is in *Critique of Practical Reason* 58-61, where Kant emphasizes first that desiring something or finding it pleasant is not a sufficient indication that it is valuable. Even putting moral considerations aside, an object or state of affairs that one desires can lack value, if it does not contribute to one's overall well-being. And more crucially for Kant, a desire or a choice only confers value if it is consistent with moral law, so "it is the moral law that first determines and makes possible the concept of the good," where "the good" here means the valuable, rather than exclusively the morally good.¹³ To call something valuable is just to say that it is the object of a real or hypothetical agent's choice, on the condition that this choice is made in recognition of principles of prudence and morality.¹⁴

Taking this Kantian conception of value seriously allows for a consistent and unified reading of Kant's discussions of different types of ends and their accompanying types of value, with talk about the value of ends being a way to express the conceptually prior idea of rational choices. Subjective ends are ends chosen on the basis of inclination, so they can "provide no

universal principles, no principles valid and necessary for all rational beings.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, subjective ends can provide a reason, albeit a “conditional” reason to act. If someone actually possesses an inclination toward some end, and the end is morally permissible, then she has some reason to seek the end. To capture this idea, we can say that the end has a “relative” value for the agent because of her inclinations, and a value that is “conditional” on her inclination and on the moral permissibility of the end. In contrast, an objective end, or the end in itself, provide reasons for action that are “valid for every rational being” so it can serve as the ground of a “supreme practical principle and a categorical imperative.”¹⁶ Since an objective end provides everyone with reasons to act, regardless of her inclinations, its value can be said to be absolute instead of relative, and unconditional in the sense that it always has value regardless of other circumstances. In addition, no amount of satisfaction of inclination justifies choosing in ways that ignore the importance of the end in itself. Since “no other end can be substituted for it,”¹⁷ its value “is infinitely above all price”¹⁸ and “incomparable.”¹⁹ This also is consistent with Kant’s claim about the value of a good will, that “considered in itself it is to be treasured as incomparably higher than anything it could ever bring about merely in order to satisfy inclination.”²⁰ Every agent always has reason to choose to accept and act on moral principles, or in other words to maintain a good will. So Kant says a good will’s value is absolute, unconditional and incomparable.

The unity of Kant’s account of choice, ends, and value is lost, on Glasgow’s reading of the value of humanity. In order to avoid the conclusion that good will and the end in itself have the same kind of absolute, incomparable value, Glasgow places the value of the end in itself in a different category of value, as only moral status. Of course, it is quite possible for a philosopher to build a moral theory on a foundation of *sui generis* moral status. But Kant seems instead to base all value, whether absolute or conditional, on the choices of rational agents. It is telling that Glasgow uses Mill’s utilitarianism as his example of a moral theory that makes value, as moral status, the foundation of right action. Mill does provide a moral theory based on a conceptually fundamental claim about value as moral status. But since Kant’s value scheme is quite different

from Mill's, this provides no compelling reason to think Kant must follow Mill in sharply separating moral status from other kinds of value, or in making this type of value foundational and inexplicable.

The strongest evidence Glasgow gives for his claim that Kant attributes different types of value to the end in itself and to good will is one quotation from *Groundwork* 437.²¹ In this familiar passage, Kant says that the end in itself must be conceived “not as an end to be produced, but as a self-sufficient end.” But Kant's main concern here is to contrast the end in itself with contingent ends. There is a real difference between contingent ends, the most familiar type of ends, and the end in itself. Contingent ends are typically states of affairs which an agent desires to bring about. A person who is an end in herself is not a state of affairs to bring about. So an end in itself is not the object of the same kinds of choices as more typical, contingent ends. Nevertheless, the end in itself does demand certain kinds of choices, namely of “preserving, promoting and respecting rational agency,” as Glasgow himself puts it.²² The idea underlying all Kantian value claims, I maintain, is the idea of the choices that rational beings would make. I believe that Glasgow unnecessarily multiplies Kant's categories of value by overemphasizing the difference between “goodness” which must be brought into existence and “moral status” which must only be acknowledged in one's choices.

In fact, as evidence that Kant does not mean to put great weight on the idea that the end in itself is never an end to be brought about, one can find a number of passages in which Kant quite specifically says that one ought to pursue an ideal of humanity. So in one sense, humanity is an end to be produced, in that one ought to seek “humanity,” as a more perfected state of rationality. Of course, no one can control another person's choices directly, so no one has a duty to produce a more ideal or perfect will in others. But when it comes to one's own choices, one has a duty of self-perfection, and in Kant's works ranging chronologically from *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1787 to *The Metaphysics of Morals* in 1797, Kant generally feels free to call this a duty to pursue the ideal of humanity. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says that corresponding to the Idea of *die Menschheit*, there is an ideal of humanity and that we should reform ourselves by

comparing ourselves to this ideal.²³ In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, he describes an “ideal of humanity,” or of “such moral perfection as is possible to a being pertaining to this world” and says that we must strive to achieve this ideal of humanity or virtue.²⁴ And in more commonly cited passages in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant consistently maintains that one of our basic duties is a duty of moral self-perfection, and that this is a duty “regarding the end of humanity in our own person.”²⁵ Any doubt about whether this view of humanity as an ideal is present in *Groundwork* seems to be answered by his statement in *Groundwork* 440 that the proper object of respect is “this ideal will” of a person who acts only on universalizable maxims. Kant’s position that each of us must strive to live up to a moral ideal of humanity undercuts Glasgow’s claim that there is no sense in which humanity is a good to be brought about, and also more directly supports the idea that humanity is not some minimal form of rationality that we all necessarily possess. Instead it is a state of morally good character toward which we should strive. If it seems odd to use the label “humanity” to describe a moral ideal, then it helps if one notices that in both English and German, the demand to be more human or to be a man is a way to remind someone to pay attention to his moral character. The Yiddish *Mensch* has even passed into common usage in some parts of the English-speaking world, to mean an upstanding and decent person.

Besides responding to Joshua Glasgow’s specific criticisms of my position, I think two general points can be drawn from the discussion so far. One is that Kant not only means humanity to be an object with “moral status” but also that one’s own humanity or morally good character is an ideal to be brought about. A second, presumably less controversial, point is that in drawing conclusions from Kant’s texts, one should attempt to take a wider view of the overall context of particular passages, rather than just drawing on one phrase or sentence. Of course, few commentators would deny the claim that one’s view of the texts should be comprehensive, but it is worth pointing out some examples of how this caveat has been flouted in discussions of the humanity formulation.

Glasgow joins with prominent commentators such as Christine Korsgaard and Allen Wood in taking some statements from *The Metaphysics of Morals* as decisive evidence in favor of regarding the end in itself as some minimal form of rationality, namely just the power to set ends. The first passage says that a person has a duty to raise himself from animality “more and more toward humanity, by which he alone is capable of setting himself ends,” and the second says, “The capacity to set an end—any end whatsoever—is what characterizes humanity.”²⁶ But a look at the rest of the sections in which these statements occur shows that they are actually strong evidence for the “good will” reading of humanity. Each of the specific statements is meant to distinguish humanity from animality and in both cases Kant is discussing duties to develop one’s humanity. But in both cases, Kant also adds that we have an additional duty to develop a commitment to morality or to accept moral principles as a sufficient reason for action. And these duties of moral self-perfection stem from a “duty for a man to make his end the perfection of belonging to man as such (properly speaking, to humanity).”²⁷ It is hard to see how a duty to develop one’s moral character can be derived from the humanity formulation, unless humanity includes a commitment to morality.

Glasgow also places tremendous weight on the word “capable” in the *Groundwork* passage that says “morality is the only condition under which a rational being can be an end in itself ... morality, and humanity so far as it is capable of morality, is the only thing that has dignity.”²⁸ Because of the word “capable,” Glasgow takes Kant to be saying that “moral capacity” is the distinguishing feature of a being who is an end in herself, regardless of whether that capacity is realized. But this ignores the point of the paragraph in which the statement occurs, a paragraph in which Kant maintains that the only thing that has a dignity rather than a price is the will of a being who acts on moral principles. Kant commends the “mental attitude” of such a person as the only thing with dignity and inner value, and begins the next paragraph by asking what it is that “justifies a morally good disposition, or virtue, in making such lofty claims?” The context makes Kant’s point unambiguous, and if his use of the word “capable” seems to cast doubt on the good will reading, the doubt can be dispelled by noting that both the

English “capable” and “capacity” and the original German “*fähig*” and “*die Fähigkeit*” often refer to a realized or demonstrated ability instead of to an unrealized potential. There is actually a further conceptual oddity in taking an unrealized capacity for anything, including a capacity for good moral character, to have as high or higher value than the realized property. If the capacity by itself really has its full value regardless of whether it ever comes to fruition, then there would be no reason to ever develop it into more than a capacity. If a mere capacity for good moral character has the highest possible value, then there is no reason to develop it into actually good moral character. Attention to both the text and to the concepts involved count against taking a mere potential for morality to be the end in itself.

Of course, my point here is not to offer a full survey of all the texts in which Kant discusses humanity as an end in itself. Instead, the point is to give examples in which more attention to context and themes and less attention to a particular word or phrase would have led to different conclusions about the point of important passages. An additional, final suggestion is worth making about interpreting the content of the humanity formulation. Glasgow follows a pattern established by many commentators, of being vague about what exactly the end in itself is. For the most part, Glasgow is content to say that “rational capacity” is the end in itself, but in his most careful definition, he says that he means the end in itself is any autonomous being with practical reason, that is, with a *Wille* and *Willkür*.²⁹ But this is not the only possible meaning of Kant’s frequent references to “rational nature” or “rational beings.” Theoretical reason is also a distinctive aspect of rational nature, and *Willkür* or the power of choice by itself may be thought to be the feature that most clearly distinguishes rational beings from other creatures that we know, and *Wille*’s power to legislate moral principles seems like the feature that is most closely associated with the moral capacity that Glasgow and others find important. And to be more fully rational, a being must not only possess the power of choice and the power to legislate moral principles to herself, but also must regulate her choices with the self-legislated moral principles. Most commentators have fallen into a trap, which Glasgow does not avoid, of taking all passages about any kind of “rational nature” to support their own preferred reading of “humanity,” even

though one passage may support taking the power of choice as the end in itself, another may support taking the legislation of moral principles as the end in itself, another moral capacity, and so on. These are not all equivalent, and in fact Kant simply is not always perfectly consistent in his claims about the end in itself, or at least is not always careful in his exposition. There are passages, I acknowledge, that seem to identify something other than good will as an end in itself. But it is unfair to lump all such passages together, as if they form a consistent account that runs counter to taking good will to the end in itself. A complete survey of the texts is beyond the scope of this response to Glasgow, but if such a survey is performed, it should not leave out seldom cited passages which favor the good will reading, such as Kant's claim in *Critique of Judgment* 443 that only a good will "can give man's existence an absolute value."³⁰ A thorough examination of Kant's texts, I still believe, supports taking good will to be the end in itself.

¹ Joshua Glasgow, "Kant's Conception of Humanity" ["Kant's Humanity"], *The Journal of the History of Philosophy* 45 (2007): 291-308.

² Richard Dean, "What Should We Treat as an End in Itself?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 77 (1996): 268–88. For more developed versions of some of my arguments, see *The Value of Humanity in Kant's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

³ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* [*Groundwork*], eds. Thomas E. Hill Jr. and Arnulf Zweig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 229. In addition to page numbers of translations of Kant's work, I will give the volume and page numbers of the standard Königlische Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften edition of *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften* [*Akademie*] (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1908-13). The *Groundwork* passage mentioned here is *Akademie*, 4: 428.

⁴ Kant, *Groundwork*, 195-96, *Akademie*, 4: 393–94.

⁵ Glasgow, "Kant's Humanity," 298.

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- ⁷ Glasgow, “Kant’s Humanity,” 299.
- ⁸ Glasgow, “Kant’s Humanity,” 300.
- ⁹ Kant, *Groundwork*, 195–6, *Akademie*, 4: 393–94.
- ¹⁰ Kant, *Groundwork*, 228–9, *Akademie*, 4: 428–29.
- ¹¹ Kant says that only one thing has dignity in *Groundwork*, 235, *Akademie*, 4: 435, and attributes dignity or incomparable value to a good will in *Groundwork*, 196, *Akademie*, 4: 394.
- ¹² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 50, *Akademie*, 5: 57–58.
- ¹³ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 55, *Akademie*, 5: 64.
- ¹⁴ Although this is a standard view of Kant’s concept of value, Paul Guyer and (less emphatically) Barbara Herman have argued that value is conceptually fundamental in Kant’s ethics. See Paul Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law and Happiness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2, 96–171, and Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 208–10.
- ¹⁵ Kant, *Groundwork*, 228, *Akademie*, 4: 427.
- ¹⁶ Kant, *Groundwork*, 229, *Akademie*, 4: 428.
- ¹⁷ Kant, *Groundwork*, 229, *Akademie*, 4: 428.
- ¹⁸ Kant, *Groundwork*, 236, *Akademie*, 4: 435
- ¹⁹ Kant, *Groundwork*, 236, *Akademie*, 4: 436.
- ²⁰ Kant, *Groundwork*, 196, *Akademie*, 4: 394.
- ²¹ Glasgow, “Kant’s Humanity,” 299.
- ²² Glasgow, “Kant’s Humanity,” 303.
- ²³ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, *Akademie*, 3: 384.
- ²⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, eds. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 80, 176–77, *Akademie*, 6: 61, 6:183.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 197, *Akademie*, 6: 447.

²⁶ The first quotation is from Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 151, *Akademie*, 6: 387, the second from Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 154, *Akademie*, 6: 392.

²⁷ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 150, *Akademie*, 6: 386.

²⁸ Kant, *Groundwork*, 235, *Akademie*, 4: 435.

²⁹ Glasgow, "Kant's Humanity," 294.

³⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 332, *Akademie*, 5: 443.