

Poverty, Dignity, and the Kingdom of Ends*

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Abstract

Poverty is often framed as a matter of urgent need, which might be addressed by material aid or efforts to end exploitation. This chapter urges a broader and, we believe, more Kantian view. Poverty represents a violation of dignity in terms of equal moral standing. It may be framed as an exclusion from Kant's ideal of a kingdom of ends, where people participate (in Kant's words) "as ends and means." Institutions and practices continually deny many people's full participation in social and economic arrangements. We highlight three exclusions, to capture severe poverty, the worst forms of exploitation, and relative poverty. People in severe poverty are *cast away* when social systems deny them any sort of useful place in the world and leave them to perish, scavenge and beg. People are *cast out* when they are pushed to the margins, exploited as "mere means" by economic systems that offer them next to nothing in return. People in relative poverty are *cast down*, marginalised and disempowered and mired in relations of dependency. These exclusions represent forms of powerlessness; beneficence may ameliorate them but cannot overcome them. People's equal moral dignity requires, instead, fair opportunities to participate "as ends and means" in civic, social, and economic life.

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For all rational beings stand under the *law* that each of them is to treat itself and all others *never merely as a means* but always *at the same time as ends in itself*. But by this there arises a systematic union of rational beings through common objective laws, i.e. a kingdom, which – because what these laws have as their purpose is precisely the relation of these beings to one another, as ends and means – can be called a kingdom of ends (of course only an ideal). (G, 4: 433)¹

In this paper we argue that poverty should be seen as a *violation of dignity*, drawing on two of Kant’s formulations of the Categorical Imperative – the formula of humanity and the formula of the kingdom of ends. In our view, poverty should not be seen primarily in terms of exploitation, nor of failures to help people in need. A Kantian perspective should give proper weight to the actual and potential agency of those who suffer poverty. This is a question about *power*, not just the distribution of material resources. Theoretically, we will place particular emphasis on the rarely remarked reference to “ends and means” in the formula of the kingdom of ends. People are sometimes treated *merely* as means, which is one sort of disrespect for their equal moral status. Another form of disrespect, deeper and more general in form, is the denial of decent opportunities to act as means for others. The resulting powerlessness, we suggest, should be central to an adequate understanding of poverty and its violations of dignity.

We will not, here, try to develop a Kantian account of duties to address poverty. This would require a venture in Kant’s political theory, including questions of property, public goods and international right. (See e.g. Gilabert 2017, Holtman 2018, Loriaux 2020.) We will suggest, however, that no Kantian agent who has some effective say in social, economic and political relations can treat severe or even relative poverty as a matter of indifference. However imperfect, the resulting duties are not well-expressed in terms of beneficence. Instead, they should be seen in terms of the imperative of “systematic union” that frames Kant’s ideal of a kingdom of ends.

Both in academic debates and institutional declarations, poverty is often regarded as a violation of human dignity (e.g. Schaber 2010, Mieth 2012, Sedmak 2013, Singh 2017).² Kant’s influence on discussions of human dignity is immense. But this is mainly in terms of his prohibition of instrumentalization (cf. recently Kleingeld 2020, Kerstein 2013, Papadaki 2016).

It is hard to make sense of the wrong of poverty in these terms. Some poor people are exploited (as emphasised by e.g. Meckled-Garcia 2013 or Wenar 2008). But many are not.

If one frames poverty as a failure to assist (e.g. Singer 1972, 2009), it is also hard to see it as a violation of dignity. With the possible exception of easy rescue cases, beneficence is an imperfect duty. It leaves wide latitude with regard to whom to help and how to do so. Moreover, as we will stress, assistance may itself humiliate or demean. The failure to help some or many persons in need does not suggest a direct violation of dignity, let alone some sort of instrumentalization.

Our main aim, then, is to show how poverty represents a violation of dignity within Kant's ethical framework. We proceed in four steps. First, we spell out Kant's notion of human dignity for "rational beings with needs" (DV, 6: 453). Second, we ask what it means *not* to respect the equal moral status of persons. Here we distinguish two theses: *a.* the vulnerability to instrumentalization thesis and *b.* the humiliation thesis. Third, we show what it means to respect the equal moral status of persons in terms of the formula of the kingdom of ends, introducing two further theses: *c.* the respect-for-ends-in-themselves thesis and *d.* the treating-others-as-ends-and-means thesis. Fourth, we argue that poverty should be understood as a matter of powerlessness and exclusion. This represents its primary insult in Kantian terms: disrespect for the equal moral worth and inherent dignity of persons.

1. Kant's conception of human dignity

Kant's conception of human dignity emphasizes two different aspects of human nature. These relate to our double nature as "rational beings with needs" (DV, 6: 453) and, more specifically, to the problems we face in realising moral demands when some are needy and others are powerful.

As persons or rational beings, we have an inviolable dignity. This represents a first and fundamental notion of dignity as an inalienable equality of moral standing, "an absolute inner worth" (DV, 6: 435), "the supreme limiting condition in the use of all means" (G, 4: 438). Elizabeth Anderson (2008), Oliver Sensen (2011) and Jeremy Waldron (2013) have emphasised how Kant transforms an older notion of dignity. His conception universalises the honour and self-esteem traditionally claimed by the nobility: a notion that locates dignity in a privileged social status. On Kant's account, dignity becomes the birthright of every human being. It implies duties to respect the standing of every other person. It also implies duties of self-assertion – no one should allow herself to be a mere means for others.

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At the same time, Kant is well aware that human beings continue to stand in relations of inferiority and superiority. This gives rise to a second aspect of dignity, as something that can be diminished or upheld. Kant states, for example, that we are able to “forfeit” or “violate the dignity of humanity” in our own person (DV, 6: 435, 429). Dignity in terms of social status refers to people’s relation to others and their sense of themselves.

Moral dignity is inviolable and absolute, whereas social dignity is violable and gradable. Someone who acts as if she had lower worth than others does not uphold her own moral dignity. Kant refers to this as “false humility (servility)” (DV, 6: 420). Someone who assumes he has higher value than others falls into arrogance (DV, 6: 435, 465). Similarly, you may be wrongly treated by others: exploited or demeaned, as if you had a lower standing, which is arrogance on their part, or as if you had a higher standing, which is servility on their part.

This framing has close connection to approaches to dignity developed by Avishai Margalit (1998) and Peter Schaber (2010), which stress the ability to live a life based on self- and mutual respect. Their emphasis is not so much on individual failures to live up to one’s own moral status, but rather what it does to others if we fail to respect their dignity or equal moral standing. Margalit, for example, defines humiliation in a “normative sense” in terms of “any sort of behaviour or condition that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured” (Margalit 1998, 9). A life in dignity is endangered when unequal social status gives rise to treatment that disrespects someone’s equal moral status and infringes upon their self-respect.

Kant divides our duties to others into duties of respect and duties of love. “The duty of respect for my neighbour is contained in the maxim not to degrade any other to a mere means to my ends (not to demand that another throw himself away in order to slave for my end)” (DV, 6: 450). This appears quite different from a duty of love: “to make others’ *ends* my own (provided only that these are not immoral)” (DV, 6: 450). “By carrying out the duty of love to someone I put another under obligation; I make myself deserving from him. But in observing a duty of respect I put only myself under obligation; I keep myself within my own bounds...” (DV, 6: 450). While it seems clear that violations of the duty of respect can be interpreted as failures to recognise people’s dignity, this is less obvious when it comes to duties of love. Failures to help someone in need may not instrumentalize that person; only in some cases, we suggest, do they disrespect her status as an end in herself. (See 3.c. below.)

At the same time, some forms of help, which might seem to correspond to duties of love, can pose risks to dignified social relations. Assistance may disrespect the beneficiary’s equal moral standing by emphasizing her unequal social status or dependency. In terms of moral standing, giver and receiver obviously stand on a fundamental footing of equality. Beneficence, however,

creates a sort of asymmetry. The receiver contracts a duty of gratitude.³ Moreover, this duty often supervenes on a social inequality, even if (in more modern societies) this no longer takes the form of distinct ranks. Beneficence is most easily practiced when one person has “means in excess of his own needs”; it is most badly needed when another person suffers a deficit (DV, 6: 453). Alongside a relative lack of social power, the recipient now stands in the giver’s debt.

Kant advises, then, that the giver should make deliberate efforts to compensate for his one-sided power to help and to minimise the “binding” connected with duties of gratitude:

Someone who is rich (has abundant means for the happiness of others, i.e., means in excess of his own needs) should hardly even regard beneficence as a meritorious duty on his part... He must also carefully avoid any appearance of intending to bind the other by it; for if he showed that he wanted to put the other under an obligation (which always humbles the other in his own eyes), it would not be a true benefit that he rendered him. Instead he must show that he is himself put under obligation by the other’s acceptance or honoured by it, hence that the duty is merely something that he owes; unless (as is better) he can practice his beneficence in complete secrecy. (DV, 6: 453, our emphasis)

The giver honours the beneficiary’s equal moral standing by taking on a debt of his own and – so far as he can – releasing the other from the bond that would otherwise be created. Someone who enjoys excess wealth, for example, should refuse the temptation to convert this social power into phony moral superiority or credit. As noted, Kant refers to this as the vice of arrogance (DV, 6: 465). Duties of love must be carried out so as not to infringe on dignity: they must demonstrate respect and remain compatible with self-respect, although the social standing or indeed power positions of donor and recipient may be quite asymmetrical.

These injunctions do not cancel the duty of gratitude, but they do aim to remove its sting: the painful sense of diminished dignity. As Kant notes, this represents a major temptation to ingratitude: “we fear that by showing gratitude we take the inferior position of a dependent in relation to his protector, which is contrary to real self-esteem (pride in the dignity of humanity in one’s own person)” (DV, 6: 459, our emphasis).

The same fear may serve a more constructive role, however, if it motivates prudence and self-responsibility. Just as we should avoid the indignity of servility or of making ourselves mere means for others, we should – Kant holds – avoid dependency and indebtedness: “Contract no debt for which you cannot give full security. – Do not accept favours you could do without, and do not be a parasite or a flatterer or (what really differs from these only in degree) a beggar. Be thrifty, so that you will not become destitute” (DV, 6: 436). Nonetheless, however prudently we conduct ourselves, there are bound to be situations in which we are vulnerable and depend on others. As “beings with needs,” we must will beneficence as a maxim, on pain of a

contradiction in the will (G, 4: 423). And of course, large disparities in social power imply that some enjoy “abundant means... in excess of [their] own needs,” while many others are left wanting through no fault of their own. Thus Kant’s well-known claim: “Having the resources to practice such beneficence as depends on the goods of fortune is, for the most part, a result of certain human beings being favoured through the injustice of the government, which introduces an inequality of wealth that makes others need their beneficence” (DV, 6: 454).

In sum, there are clear tensions between our equal moral dignity and (often unequal) social status, including powers to act and needs for help. Kant lessens these by emphasizing how beneficence and gratitude, rightly practiced, recognise that social power and abundant means are merely affordances in doing well by others: there is no dignity in possessing them and hardly even merit in using them well. Unnecessary dependence is to be avoided, but there is no indignity in accepting help that one needs. But the fact remains that we readily make mistakes in both directions. We may find honour in social privilege and bind or oblige others even as we assist them; we may feel indignity in neediness and, if helped, experience a sense of humiliation rather than gratitude.

2. What does it mean *not* to respect the moral status of persons in the context of poverty?

In this section, we discuss two ways in which poverty may be thought to violate people’s equal moral standing and diminish their social dignity: the *vulnerability-to-instrumentalization thesis* and the *humiliation thesis*. Kant describes “the poor” as those “who lack the most basic necessities” (DV, 6: 457). Such neediness, of course, presents terrible problems of health and survival. On our account, however, it is not necessarily a problem of dignity. Poverty represents a violation of dignity insofar as a person’s ability to live a life in self-respect is infringed upon by others or institutional arrangements – or as Peter Schaber puts it, “insofar as poor people are dependent on others in a degrading way” (2011, 151).⁴

a. The vulnerability-to-instrumentalization thesis

Many philosophers hold that, on a Kantian framing, instrumentalization is the paradigm denial of dignity. For example, Samuel Kerstein holds that the decisive feature of a “Kant-Inspired Account of Dignity” is the prohibition of instrumentalization: “an agent’s treatment of another fails to respect his dignity if the treats the other merely as a means” (2013, 139, cf. 127ff.). Assuming that using someone as a mere means is generally more severe than other forms of wrongdoing, a natural way to frame poverty as a violation of dignity is to see it as a social condition involving vulnerability to systematic instrumentalization. As Elizabeth Ashford writes, exploitation often accompanies circumstances of severe poverty:

the reason the workers accept very long hours in poor safety conditions is because they face the choice between accepting these working conditions or destitution. The “option” of destitution is unsustainable relative to an objective conception of well-being, given, that it is liable to lead to their children’s starvation, for example... Thus their options are restricted to the point that they have no acceptable choice but to accept the working conditions... Sweatshop labor is associated with ruthless infliction of harm on especially vulnerable individuals in order to extract as much money from them as possible, which is an extreme case of using as mere means. (2013, 148f.)

Such instrumentalization may have the further effect of cementing poverty, both for the persons directly affected and in terms of economic systems that rely on such exploitation.

While these problems are urgent and undeniable, the broader problem of extreme poverty is not well captured in such terms. In many cases, whole groups of people are marginalised by economic systems, such that no actors are exploiting them or even consider doing so. In this case, it seems a stretch to describe their problem in terms of *vulnerability to instrumentalization*. “Vulnerability” only makes sense in terms of a foreseeable threat. As already noted, failures to help or to challenge such situations, on the part of those who are more fortunate, do not seem to contradict the prohibition of instrumentalization. If there is still a violation of dignity, we will need to capture it in other terms.

b. The humiliation thesis

Lucy Allais considers the poverty of non-exploited persons in terms of the reliance on charity that it involves. If a person does not even have the option of exploitative work, then seeking private charity may be his only way to survive. In this case, as Allais puts it, his basic needs are “met in the wrong way.”

The person whose basic needs are met through someone else’s giving is having their fundamental needs met as a result of a choice of another person. Being a subject of a state means having an entitlement to the defense of your basic freedoms, including absolute poverty relief. In the absence of this, the person in absolute poverty is forced into a situation in which their innate freedom is not respected. The only way in which they can meet their basic needs is by subjecting themselves to the discretionary choices of others. Since, on this account, being a free agent is a matter of not being subject in this way to the discretionary choices of others, this means that they are forced into a position in which the only way they can survive is by acting in a way that is not compatible with respecting their freedom. This is why it is demeaning. (2015, 766)

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Like Avishai Margalit, Allais points out that it is humiliating to depend on others for one's very existence: "forcing people into situations in which they have no option but to compromise their autonomy or self-respect wrongs them in more ways than simply the harm done" (2015, 767). The problem of dignity then lies not in severe need, simply as such. Rather, it arises in a context of differential wealth, where some people have no option but to beg or plead before others who are in a more fortunate situation. Kant can certainly be understood in this way. We already referred to the passage in the *Doctrine of Virtue* where he describes our duties "with reference to the dignity of humanity within us": "Do not accept favours you could do without, and do not be a parasite or a flatterer or (what really differs from these only in degree) a beggar. Be thrifty, then, so that you will not become destitute" (DV, 6: 436).

Allais sees the problem as primarily institutional. In general, individuals cannot remedy poverty by giving alms. But even if an exceptionally wealthy person could do this for some poor persons, it would also represent the wrong way to address the problem: people would still depend on the good will of others for their very survival. As Allais points out, following Ripstein (2009), Kant contends that the state should impose taxes in order to grant poverty-relief and not rely on voluntary forms of assistance (DR, 6: 326). Remediable severe poverty is a problem of unjust institutions that foster and even enforce relations of private dependency. In Ripstein's terms, such dependency is a fundamental denial of freedom and equality. We would also stress, with Allais, that they are inimical to our dignity as a social status. The beggar can survive only by begging or scavenging, with all the humiliations this involves.

At this point, the argument structurally resembles the vulnerability-to-instrumentalization thesis.⁵ Poor people are vulnerable to a deep wrong. The difference is just that, in the cases pictured by Allais, richer people do not exploit the poor, but rather give help at their private discretion. A loss of social dignity is imposed upon poor persons, such that it is difficult for others to perceive them as equal moral agents. In Peter Schaber's terms, they are unable to live a decent life, where this is understood as a life of self-respect which includes choices between several acceptable alternatives. Obviously, neither starving nor begging nor stealing can count as such (Schaber 2010, 111ff.).

Allais stresses the humiliating inadequacy of private charity: poverty needs to be addressed on an institutional level, not just on pragmatic grounds but also to avoid problems of personal dependency and unfreedom. We would add that institutional solutions, such as welfare bureaucracies or charities, may not eliminate feelings of humiliation and dependency either. However firmly anchored institutional aid or statutory poverty relief may be in ideas of solidarity or each citizen's right to adequate shelter and subsistence, the fact of dependency remains. As Margalit notes, a welfare state still "deprives the needy of the ability and authority to decide their own affairs, and hands over decisions that should express the individual's

autonomy to paternalistic officials” (1996, 238). Institutional hand-outs carry their own problems, even if they address material want and do their best to mitigate problems of humiliation, supplication and gratitude. They do not enable people’s full participation in society and hardly touch wider problems posed by sharp inequalities, widespread unemployment, or the pervasiveness of badly paid, exploitative work.

3. What would it mean to respect the moral status of persons? – two more theses

c. Respect-for-ends-in-themselves

Let us now turn to two ways in which we might positively respect others as ends-in-themselves, taking our cue from Kant’s famous formula of humanity. As we know, this tells us to make sure we “use humanity... always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (G, 4: 429). And Kant adds that we must look for a “positive agreement [*positive Übereinstimmung*] with *humanity, as an end in itself*” – and doing so requires us “to *advance* [*befördern*] the ends of others” (G, 4: 430).

As a first thought – and following Kant’s own emphasis of duties of beneficence – one might observe that an important way to respect someone is to give him or her help, where the need is clear and the help is within one’s power. To deny help, by contrast, is to commit a clear moral wrong. This is the structure of Singer’s drowning child example (1971), where the sheer urgency of someone’s need coincides with a ready opportunity to help, thus generating an uncontroversial positive duty. To ignore someone in dire need would disregard her status as an end in herself, “the supreme limiting condition in the use of all means, that is, always at the same time as an end” (G, 4: 438). It would rather be to treat her as a mere thing – an object of no consequence that might be discarded.

Allow us to underline the last point, since it is often omitted in discussions of Kant. When he introduces the person-thing distinction (G, 4:428), Kant tends to emphasise the potential usefulness of both. We will be emphasising how well-founded this is in the case of persons: as Kant says, each of us has a fundamental duty to be “useful members of the world” (DV, 6: 446). In the case of things, it is misleading: many physical entities are useless to us. Kant may downplay this insofar as he pictures nature, at some higher level, as forming a systematic, purposive whole; perhaps also because he never witnessed the sheer wastefulness of modern consumer societies. However this may be, to speak of things having “conditional worth” is to imply that they may prove worthless; likewise, the corollary of potential useability is possible uselessness or even harmfulness. (Cf Kant’s use of “*ohne Wert*” and “*disponieren*” at G, 4:428,

429.) To fail in duties of easy rescue is to treat a person as an object of mere indifference: a useless thing, not even a means, never mind an end-in-herself.⁶

In any event, framing matters in terms of duties to rescue misses the mark so far as systematic poverty is concerned. It runs up against all the familiar problems of imperfect duties – not least, problems of knowledge and opportunity and coordination. At a deeper level, it runs up against the problems of systematic dependency on other people’s willingness to help. As Allais argues, such dependency points to systematic faults in social structures and practices: individual actions can at best ameliorate the effects of these structures; only collective action can address them. A single act may save a drowning child. But the child must then be returned to parents or other persons who will take care of him or her. Parenting, in turn, enables a person to take his place in the world as an active participant: someone who can contribute to our lives together and obtain the means to support himself. The hidden background of Singer’s example reminds us that no single act or donation is likely to rescue someone from poverty, never mind rescue countless millions of people who more fortunate persons rarely encounter face-to-face.

In other words, giving aid represents an appropriate way of recognising a person as an end-in-herself only in quite specific circumstances. More often, as Kant recognised in his remarks on gratitude and ingratitude, it has a condescending aspect that threatens people’s perceptions of their own and others’ equal moral status. No doubt, giving aid is usually better than denying it; we do not mean to denigrate the value of organised charity and welfare systems. Nonetheless, charity and welfare take for granted the fact of widespread poverty; and one aspect of that is that they address it primarily as a problem of material need. In what follows, we suggest that lack of material goods – and more broadly, lack of personal security – is just the most obvious face of a deeper wrong: that large numbers of people are closed out of forms of participation that might enable them to gain the means of subsistence and live securely. Failing to treat those persons as ends-in-themselves is not necessarily a matter of instrumentalization or withholding aid. It is, rather, a denial of their “systematic union” with other rational beings. As we will now contend, it fails to admit those persons “as ends and means”; it denies their equal moral dignity as members of the kingdom of ends.

d. Treating others as ends and means

We are so used to thinking of denials of dignity in terms of instrumentalization that it has become counter-intuitive to say: there can be dignity in acting as a means for others. And we have become so wary of the idea that there is indignity in relying on others that we hesitate to register the wrongs of needless dependency. But neither idea is implausible and both have solid Kantian pedigrees – for example, when Kant claims that each of us “has a duty to himself to

be a useful member of the world, since this also belongs to the worth of humanity in his own person, which he ought not to degrade” (DV, 6: 446).

As noted above, the prohibition on mere instrumentalization too often takes centre-stage in Kant’s ethics, although it is strictly secondary to his basic principles. New readers of Kant’s ethics may over-emphasise it – worrying, for example, whether Kantian ethics prohibits my treating the baker as a means to obtain a loaf of bread. A related, more subtle problem often infects sophisticated treatments of Kant’s ethics. Too focussed on the dangers of instrumentalization, commentators ignore the moral importance of *people’s being means for one another*.⁷

One sign of this is the silence which has greeted some central words in Kant’s often-quoted Formula of the Kingdom of Ends:

a systematic union of rational beings through common objective laws, i.e. a kingdom, which – because what these laws have as their purpose is precisely the reference of these beings to one another, as ends and means – can be called a kingdom of ends (of course [or ‘admittedly’] only an ideal). / *eine systematische Verbindung vernünftiger Wesen durch gemeinschaftliche objective Gesetze, ... [die] die Beziehung dieser Wesen auf einander, als Zwecke und Mittel, zur Absicht haben, ein Reich der Zwecke (freilich nur ein Ideal) heißen kann.* (G, 4: 433)

We will return to Kant’s emphasis on systematic union or interconnection. What we want to underline, immediately, is the phrase: people’s relation to one another as ends and means, *als Zweck und Mittel*. These words suggest a possibility that no commentator has raised. Treating others (strictly: the humanity in their persons) as ends-in-themselves might, we believe, also entail treating them *as means* – that is, as persons who have rights and even duties to contribute to our shared lives.

The example of beggary indicates that we should at least consider this possibility. One of the things that makes beggary so problematic, from both sides, is that the beggar is usually in no position to return help or render any service to the donor. In other words, she has no way to act as a means for the giver. This creates a systematic tension. Respect for equal moral worth and inalienable dignity is meant to motivate assistance. But the fact of non-reciprocation may suggest that someone is not playing her part in “a systematic union of rational beings.” It may be hypocritical, self-serving, or dishonest to denigrate such persons, insofar as such dependency is so often forcibly imposed on people. However, as Kant well knows, such tendencies are deeply rooted in “the dear self” (G, 4: 407), to the point that one may read his practical philosophy as an extended plea to root out our deep-seated confusions between social status and moral standing.⁸

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To develop the point, we consider some cases in which people show respect for one another as ends-in-themselves just in virtue of reciprocity in acting as means.

In passing, Allais notes an example which has the same stark material inequality as the begging example. However, its normative structure is quite distinct. Buddhist ascetics may choose to live without property and hence to depend on donations. However, the ascetic renders a spiritual service to his donors. He acts as a means for them, rather than – or by virtue of – making his very survival depend on their choices. The point is made more vivid when the ascetic refuses to serve. Allais notes the case of monks “in Myanmar marching with their begging bowls upside down, thereby demonstrating that they refused alms from the military rulers and their families, and, in effect, denying them spiritual merit” (2015, 756n4).

Or consider how we may provide help to friends and family in relatively informal ways. Kant is very sensitive, even over-sensitive, to the risks of humiliation, imposition and indebtedness that can arise. We already noted his discussion of the benefactor’s duty: he should “show that he is himself put under obligation by the other’s acceptance or honoured by it, hence that the duty is merely something that he owes” (DV, 6: 453). In other words, the ethics of giving includes a duty, not simply to bestow benefits, but also to grant the recipient a way of acting *as a means for the donor*. In this way, the recipient does not merely, passively receive. He also does something in his own right (“accepts” and thereby “honours”), even if this deed comes close to being a wholly noumenal matter.⁹

If we think in systematic terms – beyond personal relationships – then economic, civic and institutional interconnections come to the fore.

Consider, first, ordinary commercial exchange – for example, between me and a shopkeeper. The shopkeeper is a means for me; as a customer, I am a means for him. We treat each other as means, while respecting one another as ends-in-ourselves – at least subject to some provisos. Neither of us must silently entertain possibilities of cheating the other, or exploit the other by virtue of (say) severe inequality in bargaining power.

Employment offers a more complex example. Obviously, employees are means for employers. We know too many examples of exploitative and unsafe employment that treat people as mere means – from sweatshop labour to the gig economy. The same problem can be captured the other way round. By deliberately minimising the extent to which she respects the interests of employees, the exploitative employer fails to act as a means for them. The employer who pays starvation wages *barely* acts as a means, denying a person what she needs in order to live any sort of decent life. By contrast, the employer who pays fair wages and ensures decent working conditions represents a means for her employee. At the same time, a responsible employee recognises the employer’s agency and authority, and thereby respects her as an end. (We set

aside the complication that most employers are institutions: however we think about such collective agents, it would not be right to see them as ends-in-themselves.)

The same principle also applies at a more abstract level. The employer who offers a socially worthwhile job acts as a means in a further sense: she opens an opportunity that might otherwise not be available to the employee. In part, this may be about access to the machinery or raw materials needed if someone's effort is to be productive. Beyond the (questionable) dynamics of capitalist employment, however, there is also a more fundamental, organisational point. Especially under modern conditions, many worthwhile contributions require complex forms of collective action. In this case, the person or institution who organises those efforts acts as a means for their employees. Those organisational efforts enable, in turn, someone to act as means for others in (we may hope) a fair scheme of cooperation.

All of these cases underline the reciprocity central to Kant's ethics. Every Kantian can agree that to *respect* others as ends-in-themselves is to recognise their capacity to set their own ends. Mere instrumentalization and outright exploitation clearly violate this. Nonetheless, it is fundamental to Kant's ethics that we have duties to act *for* others. Each of us is a moral agent who adopts ends, not just on the basis of our individual needs and inclinations, but also on the basis of obligations to others. In doing so, we act as *means* to their ends. But we must do so in a way that is compatible with our own and others' dignity.

Examples of emergency aid divert attention from the central issues. In the instant of urgent need, we must often defer questions of reciprocity and social dignity. Amid on-going social relations, by contrast, powerlessness and dire need foster paternalism and humiliation, dependency and exploitation. The better-off are tempted to ignore or exploit. Those who do help may be tempted by Pharisaical thoughts of their greater merit, perhaps even that *they* are exploited. The needy become, so to speak, *mere means* to their moral credit; assistance that cannot be reciprocated becomes paternalistic. Intuitively, such assistance may even *deserve* ingratitude, as a way of resisting the imposition of "the inferior position of a dependent in relation to his protector" (DV, 6: 459). If those in need do act for others, it must be on terms that others lay down. Their vulnerability and insecurity expose them to "offers they can't refuse" (O'Neill 1991); they become mere means for their exploiters. This is not to deny that someone in dire poverty might willingly make sacrifices for others – as very poor parents so often do for their children, for example. But such help could hardly be accepted by someone who was better off. By contrast, when someone has a range of opportunities to act for others, and where those opportunities involve meaningful reciprocity – in that case, acting as a means can be a dignified exercise of agency and a token of meaningful inclusion.

4. Poverty as exclusion from humanity

Let us bring these ideas together, to sketch an understanding of poverty as a violation of dignity in terms of the kingdom of ends. Such a kingdom, Kant says, involves people's "systematic union... through common objective laws... [that] have as their purpose [people's] relation... to one another as ends and means" (G, 4: 433). We suggest that severe poverty can be seen as involving two interlinked violations of people's dignity, understood as equal moral standing.

First, life-threatening poverty *treats persons as disposable – it casts them away*. The lives of countless millions of people are cut short by stunting, malnutrition, constant insecurity and fear, sheer neglect and lack of opportunity to secure subsistence, and the diseases and injuries that accompany all of these. Images of the world's poorest people scavenging on rubbish tips dramatically illustrate this terrible point. We already noted Kant's person-thing distinction (3.c. above): we may legitimately hold things to be useless, while such a judgment would be utterly out of order as regards a person. Recall his parallel distinction between dignity and price: a price may be put on something that is replaceable (G, 4: 434) and, by implication, disposable. The humanity of those in such life-threatening poverty is thrown away as if it were a mere thing: less than a mere means, *not even* a useful thing.¹⁰ As Kant notes, "Judging something to be worthless is contempt" (DV, 6: 462).

Second, we can say that remediable poverty *casts people out – it treats some persons as non-members*. Severe poverty casts people out from meaningful participation in social life; it deprives them of social power and denies them systematic union. This is obviously true for those who are not even exploited – just as they are not ends for others, they are denied the opportunity to act as a means for others. Severely exploited people may not be cast *away*, insofar as their lives are not immediately imperilled. But they are surely cast *out*. They have no choice regarding the terms on which they act: they must work inhuman hours in appalling conditions, gaining only the barest means of subsistence. Scrabbling to survive on the margins, they are denied means and opportunities to act on their own account, to pursue ends beyond mere survival and that of their children, never mind to shape institutions and society. They must often be frantically active and ingenious. Yet they are deprived of fair and decent ways of interacting with the larger society. The resulting social status, marginal and set apart, betrays their status as equal moral agents.

The injuries of poverty, then, do not arise just at the level of needs. They go directly to the core of our status as moral agents, because they effectively deny a person's "systematic union" with other persons on shared terms ("common objective laws"). A person is treated as a mere means or as even less than that. A person is disregarded as an end-in-herself, robbed of the power to co-decide in which ways and on what terms she will act on behalf of others' ends – or as we

have put it, act as a means for them. These are direct insults to a person's dignity, denials of social recognition and respect.

These points apply most clearly to absolute poverty, where a person's "most necessary natural needs" (DR, 6: 326) are denied or barely met, where social structures deny her meaningful opportunities to act on her own account. We can also think of degrees of disposability and exclusion, in a way that enables us to get a grip on relative as well as absolute poverty. For example, in wealthier societies, those who suffer long-term unemployment may have their basic needs met by welfare benefits. But they remain poor relative to the economic and social opportunities that many others take for granted. Those on benefits will often testify to feeling "thrown on the scrap heap" and the difficulty of maintaining self-respect when robbed of opportunities to participate in economic and social life. Similarly, low wages, precarious employment, and long working hours represent substantial obstacles to civic involvement and social participation. They also demean people directly – as Gilabert puts it, "When [working people] are dominated, and exploited, their capacities for self-direction and for cooperating as equals with others are insufficiently respected" (2017, 569). Humiliations pile upon such exclusions and disempowerments (see also Anderson 2017, Hasan 2018). By analogy with the previous two points, we may say that relative poverty reduces someone's status – it *casts them down*; it places them in a lower caste or class.

Social, economic and civic relations uphold dignity when they recognise people's right to participate as "useful members" of society, and recognise and reward them for this. They deny our dignity as equal moral agents when they push people to the margins of social, economic, civic and political life. Too many of those people perish, denied their right to "a place on the Earth" (DR, 6: 262), excluded from any sort of "systematic union" with the human beings who should be their fellows. Others survive, perhaps by scavenging or charity or scanty welfare systems, or reduced to the status of mere means for others. In none of these cases are people participants on their own terms. Though we have only gestured at such a view here, we believe that it is a matter of justice as well as dignity, that people have the opportunity to contribute to society in return for fair rewards that enable them to satisfy their needs and participate as full citizens.

Conclusion

Don't Think of an Elephant was George Lakoff's memorable title for a book about the framing of political ideas (2004). His basic thought was simple: if you want to reframe issues, then don't spend your time telling people *not* to think in the old terms. Telling people not to think about elephants only reminds them of elephants.

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At the risk of making the same mistake, we have been saying: To think about poverty, do not think of a drowning child. Apart from the element of urgent need, poverty has nothing in common with emergencies that can be solved by easy rescue. If people are drowning in poverty, it is not because they are helpless children who stupidly stumble into occasional ponds. It is because they are treated as disposable (cast away), denied admission (cast out), pushed to the margins of economic, social and civic life (cast down). These continual, active exclusions deprive people of social status, denying them decent opportunities to act as persons in their own right, who may act as means for others on their own terms: as equal bearers of a moral dignity that should be recognised as a social dignity, too.

Twentieth century political philosophy has been preoccupied with redistributing resources. Kantian theorists largely reject the idea that we should frame matters this way. We have, here, bracketed Kant's philosophy of right and the juridical aspects of property and civic participation. We have urged, however, that a Kantian framing must attend to agency and *power*. Poverty is not just about unmet needs. More fundamentally, it is about deprivation of meaningful opportunities, denial of effective say, absence of tenable options – in short, powerlessness over the terms on which one will act with and for others. Poverty violates dignity and is incompatible with our equal moral standing.

Its positive contrast is a kingdom of ends: where people act as means to others' ends while being respected by others who act as means to theirs. And one of the key ways we act as means to others' ends is by collaborating to open up worthwhile opportunities to act as “useful members of the world” – as *means* who have nothing *mere* about them.

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Endnotes

- ¹ We use the following abbreviations for Kant's works: DR – *Doctrine of Right*; DV – *Doctrine of Virtue*; G – *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.
- ² "[E]xtreme poverty is a violation of human dignity and might, in some situations, constitute a threat to the right to life" (UN General Assembly Resolution 134, 18 Dec 1992).
- ³ Another sort of inferiority arises when someone does wrong, and thereby incurs duties to repent and restore. Readers of Nietzsche's *Genealogy* will hardly miss the parallels between these.
- ⁴ It is awkward to speak of "poverty" where everyone lacks basic material goods, owing to a harsh environment or lack of appropriate technologies to secure decent subsistence from it, although we might well describe such societies as very poor. However, our point is conceptual rather than linguistic.
- ⁵ Kant even describes asking for favours as a kind of self-instrumentalization: "But belittling one's own moral worth merely as a means to acquiring the favor of another, whoever it may be (hypocrisy and flattery)... is false (lying) humility, which is contrary to one's duty to oneself since it degrades one's personality" (DV, 6: 435f.).
- ⁶ On the complexity of these duties when it comes to Kant's philosophy of right, see Ripstein 2000.
- ⁷ Allen Wood is the only exception we know (1999, 143; 2008, 87).
- ⁸ Albeit a plea not wholly consistent, when we think of the place of women and different races in his writings.
- ⁹ Barbara Herman stresses the same point from the recipient's side: We should see recipience as a deed: "*in accepting your benefit I assume a debt of gratitude.*" In this way, "I make it the case that we are doing something together, as moral equals... I thereby assert that I am not your dependent, that your agency does not stand in for mine, but that as equal persons who may at times have needs we cannot meet, we stand together" (2012, 401).
- ¹⁰ Compare Kant's comment: "As the word '*Tugend*' [virtue] comes from '*taugen*' [to be suitable or good for some purpose] so '*Untugend*' [vice] comes from '*zu nichts taugen*'" (DV, 6: 390).