

Treating Oneself Merely as a Means

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Each of us is morally required not to lie, not to kill himself, and not to defile himself by lust (e.g., masturbate), according to Kant.¹ Kant attempts to derive these “perfect duties to oneself” from the Formula of Humanity: “So act that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” ([G 4: 429], italics omitted).² He tries to show that if

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- 1 The other main “perfect duties to oneself” that Kant highlights are those not to stupefy oneself by the excessive use of food and drink, not to engage in greedy avarice, and not to be servile. Following his discussion of these six duties [MM 6: 422–437], Kant entitles a section “On the Human Being’s Duty to Himself as his own Innate Judge” [MM 6: 437–440]. He does not there derive a particular duty to oneself, but rather offers a detailed description of the conscience. At the end of the division “Perfect Duties to Oneself” (Part I, Book I of the Doctrine of Virtue), Kant places an “Episodic Section” in which he discusses three further duties to ourselves, namely a duty not to develop a “propensity to wanton destruction of what is *beautiful* in inanimate nature” [MM 6: 442–443], a duty not to treat animals cruelly, and, finally, a duty to recognize all our duties as divine commands. It is odd that Kant discusses these duties under the division “Perfect Duties to Oneself.” One might wonder, for example, why the duty not to treat animals cruelly is a duty to oneself, while the duty to sympathetic feeling is a duty to others. For Kant’s rationale for the former duty is that a person’s violent and cruel treatment of animals “dulls his shared feeling of their suffering and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one’s relations with other people” [MM 6: 443]. All references to Kant are to the “Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften” edition of his works. Under each entry, I specify the English edition I have consulted, each of which has academy edition page numbering in its margins. The translations I employ sometimes vary from those of these English editions: I use *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. Mary J. Gregor, in: Immanuel Kant: *Practical Philosophy*, 42–108. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. *Critique of Practical Reason*, tr. Mary J. Gregor, in: Immanuel Kant: *Practical Philosophy*, 138–271. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. Mary J. Gregor, in: Immanuel Kant: *Practical Philosophy*, 363–603. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- 2 Kant comes close to restating the Formula of Humanity at [MM 6: 395] and [MM 6: 462]. In derivations of four of the six duties he sets forth from [MM 6:

an agent acts contrary to the duties, then he treats himself merely as a means and thereby violates this principle. In order to understand fully Kant's rationale for the duties, we need, therefore, to pinpoint what it means to treat oneself merely as a means.

When Kant writes of treating oneself or others merely as means, he is referring to treating beings with "humanity" in this way. "Humanity" does not refer to the class of human beings, but rather to a set of capacities. Kant tells us that "the capacity to set oneself an end – any end whatsoever – is what characterizes humanity (as distinguished from animality)" [MM 6: 392]. So at the very least, if a being has humanity, then it has the capacity to set ends. Kant, it seems, uses "humanity" interchangeably with "rational nature" (see, e.g., [G 4: 439]). In doing so he suggests that having humanity involves having a whole set of rational capacities. Among them is the capacity to act on maxims and hypothetical imperatives, as well the capacity to act autonomously, that is, (roughly) to conform to self-given moral imperatives purely out of respect for these imperatives.³ In what follows, references to treating oneself or others in some way are shorthand for treating the humanity in oneself or others in this way.

Philosophers have paid relatively little attention to the task of discerning what, according to Kant, it means to treat oneself merely as a means, focusing more on specifying what it means to treat others in this way. Kant gives his most thorough indication of what it means to do the latter in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* when he tries to derive from the Formula of Humanity a duty not to make false promises:

422] to [MM 6: 437], Kant obviously relies on this principle. In his derivation of two others, namely the duty not to stupefy oneself by the excessive use of food or drink and the duty not to engage in greedy avarice, the role of the Formula of Humanity is less clear. But his derivation of the duty not to stupefy oneself at least appears to stem from the Formula of Humanity. For Kant's objection to doing so seems to be that it severely diminishes one's capacity to exercise one's rational capacities. Perhaps Kant holds that diminishing this capacity is, other things being equal, incompatible with holding humanity to be an end in itself. If Kant appeals at all to the Formula of Humanity in his derivation of the duty not to engage in greedy avarice, it is in the rather obscure fifth paragraph of section 10 [MM 6: 432–433].

- 3 Here I am following Thomas E. Hill Jr., 1992, "Humanity as an End in Itself," in: *Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant's Moral Theory*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 38–57, at pp. 28–41. For a slightly different account of what Kant means by humanity, see Allen W. Wood, 1999, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 118–120.

He who has it in mind to make a false promise to others sees at once that he wants to make use of another human being *merely as a means*, without the other at the same time containing in himself the end. For, he whom I want to use for my purposes by such a promise cannot possibly agree to my way of behaving toward him, and so himself contain the end of this action [G 4: 429–430].

According to one influential interpretation, namely that of Onora O’Neill, Kant here implies that an agent treats another merely as a means and thus wrongly if in his treatment of the other the agent does something to which the other cannot consent.⁴ O’Neill implies that an agent can consent to (or, equivalently, agree to) a course of action only if it is possible for him to dissent from it. It is possible in the relevant sense for someone to dissent from a course of action, she says, only if he “can avert or modify the action by withholding consent and collaboration”.⁵ According to O’Neill, if an agent deceives or coerces another, then the other’s dissent is “in principle ruled out,” and thus so is his consent.⁶ Suppose, for example, that an auto mechanic makes a false promise to a customer to have his repair done by 5:00 PM. The customer does not really have the opportunity to dissent to the mechanic’s action. For he does not know what her action is, namely one of lying to him about when his car will be ready. Deceit, along with coercion, are central cases of some agents treating others merely as means.

However plausible this reading of treating others merely as a means might be, it does not help us to understand treating oneself in this way.⁷

4 Onora O’Neill, 1989, “Between Consenting Adults,” in: *Constructions of Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 105–125, at p. 113. Christine Korsgaard seems to agree with Onora O’Neill on this point. “The question whether another can assent to your way of acting,” writes Korsgaard, “can serve as a criterion for judging whether you are treating her as a mere means”, Christine Korsgaard, 1996, “The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil”, in: *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 133–158, at p. 139. More precisely, O’Neill suggests that an agent treats another merely as a means and thus wrongly if in his treatment of the other he acts *on a maxim* to which the other cannot consent. It is notoriously difficult to specify what Kant means by a maxim, and for the sake of simplicity I do not invoke maxims here. My not doing so does not so far as I can tell affect the substance of what follows.

5 O’Neill, 1989, p. 110.

6 O’Neill, 1989, p. 111.

7 In my opinion, Kant might be committed to an account of treating others merely as means along the lines of the one O’Neill attributes to him. But, as I argue in “Treating Others Merely as Means” (manuscript), I do not believe this account to be philosophically plausible.

Kant holds that an agent treats himself merely as a means if he kills himself, masturbates, or lies. But in these cases, the agent is able to consent to the way he treats himself; he can avert or modify this treatment. All of these actions are, of course, in violation of the categorical imperative, according to Kant. But to “satisfy the categorical command of morality is within everyone’s power at all times,” he tells us [*CPrR* 5: 36–37]. In short, since agents are free, they would in Kant’s view never be unable to consent to their treating themselves in a morally impermissible way.⁸ So in order to understand Kant’s conception of an agent’s treating himself merely as a means it does not suffice to consider O’Neill’s account of what, according to Kant, it means to treat others in this way.

This paper attempts to shed light on what, according to Kant, it means to treat oneself merely as a means. Since Kant relies on this notion in connection with his discussion of duties to oneself, I discuss briefly his conception of these duties (Section I). In Section II I consider a simple answer to the question of what it means to treat oneself merely as a means, namely that doing so just amounts to failing to treat oneself as an end in himself, that is, as something that is unconditionally and incomparably valuable. This answer does not allow us to understand how Kant actually employs the notion of treating oneself merely as a means, I argue. Section III is devoted to developing a different interpretation of this notion – an interpretation that stems from ideas implicit in the false promising passage cited above. In Section IV, I use this interpretation in an attempt to illuminate Kant’s efforts to derive duties not to murder oneself, not to defile oneself by lust, and not to lie. But I do not offer anything approaching an interpretation of all of the arguments Kant

8 One might argue that there are rare cases in which an individual uses himself in some way yet cannot, in the relevant sense, consent to this usage. For example, an agent chooses not only to be brainwashed into believing that he’ll die if he drinks a sip more of alcohol, but also into forgetting that he ever agreed to or underwent such a procedure. The agent treats himself in some way: he gets brainwashed in order to break his addiction to alcohol. Suppose that it is legitimate to think that the self who chose to get brainwashed on Monday is now, on Friday, treating his brainwashed self in some way: the former is doing something to the latter. On this supposition, the legitimacy of which Kant would, I think, deny, we can see how the agent’s former self would be treating his current self merely as a means. For the current self cannot avert or modify the former self’s action. He does not even know what this action is.

suggests for these duties. The final section highlights some difficulties with Kant's efforts to derive them.

I.

The duties that are such that in failing to abide by them one is treating oneself merely as a means are duties to oneself, according to Kant. It thus makes sense to consider briefly Kant's general discussion of duties to oneself. Unfortunately, this discussion is not particularly illuminating.

The notion of a duty to oneself contains an apparent contradiction, Kant tells us. It belongs to the concept of a duty that if an agent has one, then he is "passively constrained" [MM 6: 417] to conform to the duty. Yet it is self-contradictory to affirm that an agent is passively constrained if he is the very agent who imposes the duty. For if it is he who imposes the duty, then he can always release himself from it. But if he can always release himself from the duty, then, by definition, he is not passively constrained to conform to it. In short, it is self-contradictory to claim that it is the very same entity who imposes an obligation and who is under this obligation. Yet if we maintain there to be duties to oneself, then we are, it appears, committed to this claim.

Kant tries to show that in fact we are not committed to it. When we reflect, we realize that in our view the being who imposes obligation is not one and the same as the being who stands under it. Kant mentions two aspects of the human being: the sensible being (*homo phaenomenon*), that is, an animal with reason and the intelligible being (*homo noumenon*), that is, a free agent [MM 6: 418]. According to Kant, the *homo phaenomenon* cannot be put under obligation. But "a being endowed with inner freedom (*homo noumenon*), is regarded as a being that can be put under obligation" [MM 6: 418], he says. It would thus seem natural for Kant to affirm that it is not the very same being who imposes an obligation and who is under it. It is, rather, one aspect of an individual, the *homo phaenomenon*, who imposes an obligation and another aspect of this individual, the *homo noumenon* who is under it. So the notion of a duty to oneself is not self-contradictory.

But Kant does not affirm this. He says, rather, that the "human being thought in terms of his personality, that is, as a being endowed with inner freedom (*homo noumenon*), is regarded as a being that can be put under obligation and, indeed, under obligation to himself (to the humanity in his own person)" [MM 6: 418]. According to Kant, humanity is

constitutive of the *homo noumenon* (see, e.g., [MM 6: 239, 295] and Vigilantius “Notes on the lectures of Mr. Kant on the metaphysics of morals,” [27: 627–628]). So Kant is maintaining here that the *homo noumenon* can be put under obligation to the *homo noumenon*. The *homo phaenomenon* drops out of the relation. The difficulty Kant initially raised remains: how, without contradiction, can one maintain that a human being – in particular a human being considered solely as *homo noumenon* – both imposes constraint (an obligation) on itself and is passively constrained?⁹

Kant develops a tool that might enable him to give a satisfactory answer to this question, although he does not explicitly use it in the context of discussing the apparent contradiction in a duty to oneself. This tool is his distinction between the will [*Wille*] and choice [*Willkür*]. Kant tells us that:

Laws proceed from the will, maxims from choice. In man the latter is a free choice; the will, which is directed to nothing beyond the law itself, cannot be called either free or unfree, since it is not directed to actions but immediately to giving laws for the maxims of actions (and is, therefore, practical reason itself). Hence the will directs with absolute necessity and is itself subject to no necessitation. Only choice can therefore be called free ([MM 6: 226], italics omitted).

Perhaps, according to Kant’s considered view, the *homo noumenon* itself has two aspects: free choice [*freie Willkür*], which is a capacity to act without being determined to do so by any sensible impulse (see, e.g., [MM 6: 213–214]) and the will [*Wille*], which is a capacity to set forth unconditionally binding moral laws. Free choice is constrained and the will does the constraining. If this interpretation is on target, Kant might be able to maintain that, despite appearances to the contrary, there is no contradiction in holding that the *homo noumenon* has duties to itself.

In any case, this is the interpretation I will assume. Strictly speaking, the being who has duties to itself is the *homo noumenon* – in particular its capacity of free choice; the being who promulgates these duties is a different aspect of the *homo noumenon*, namely the will. (The will promulgates them through presenting or “legislating” the moral law.) For simplicity’s sake, in what follows I will not employ the term “*homo noumenon*,” but will instead simply write of a person or of humanity.

9 Andrews Reath makes a similar point (2002, “Self-Legislation and Duties to Oneself,” in: Timmons (ed.), *Kant’s Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretive Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 349–370, at p. 356).

II.

In the Doctrine of Virtue, Kant reaffirms his *Groundwork* conviction that humanity has dignity. It has “absolute inner worth,” a value which is beyond any price and which exacts respect [MM 6: 434–435]. Violating perfect duties to oneself somehow involves a failure to give humanity, namely one’s own, the respect it demands. In Section III, I sketch an interpretation/reconstruction of what it means for an agent to treat himself merely as a means. Based on the *Groundwork* passage on false promising quoted above, the interpretation lays out a detailed procedure for determining whether an agent is treating himself in this way. Examining this procedure will, I hope, help us to see precisely how, in violating his perfect duties not to kill himself, defile himself by lust, or lie, an agent fails to respect his rational nature.

But one might ask whether reconstructing such a procedure on Kant’s behalf is really necessary. In deriving other perfect duties to oneself, namely those not to stupefy oneself with too much food or drink, not to be avaricious, and not to be servile, Kant does not rely on the notion of treating oneself merely as a means. So why get bogged down in developing a detailed procedure for determining whether an agent treats himself merely as a means? Why not, in the case of each of the perfect duties to oneself Kant enumerates, interpret him to be simply appealing to (what he takes to be) our view that acting contrary to them expresses disrespect for humanity?

A difficulty with this approach is that it can leave rather mysterious how Kant arrives at some of the duties. Consider, for example, a recent treatment of Kant’s derivation of the duty not to lie. According to Lara Denis, Kant claims that “when we profess to be expressing our minds, intentionally speaking in a way that misrepresents what we think shows a lack of respect for our rational nature.” It shows a lack of respect in that it “expresses an insufficient commitment to represent externally our rational nature”.¹⁰ For we represent our rational nature externally by speaking truthfully, not by lying.

This is a puzzling argument. Suppose that lying does express a lack of commitment to represent our rational nature externally.¹¹ What would constitute a sufficient commitment? Isn’t refraining from representing

10 Lara Denis, 1997, “Kant’s Ethics and Duties to Oneself,” in: *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 78, pp. 321–348, at p. 331.

11 I’m not at all sure that it does. Who but a rational being is capable of lying?

our rational nature externally, at least on some occasions, compatible with respecting it as something of absolute inner worth? If lying always reveals an inadequate commitment to represent our rational nature externally, does remaining silent when we could be expressing our thoughts do so as well? Denis suggests that Kant's answer is no. But what is (or might be) his justification for this answer? There remains a gap between the idea that, in virtue of its special value, an agent must respect his humanity and the finding that lying involves his disrespecting it.

In his *Doctrine of Virtue* attempt to fill this gap Kant does not, in any case, rely on the notion of a commitment to represent our rational nature externally. But he does invoke the idea that in lying an agent treats himself merely as a means. Close examination of this notion therefore makes sense. It might not render Kant's derivations acceptable, but it should make them a bit more comprehensible.

III.

Kant writes little about precisely what treating a person merely as a means amounts to. But he suggests possible interpretations in his attempt in the *Groundwork* to show how a duty not to make false promises stems from the Formula of Humanity. As we noted, according to one influential interpretation Kant there implies that an agent treats another merely as a means and thus wrongly if in his treatment of the other the agent does something to which the other cannot consent. Yet we cannot effectively adapt this account to the case of an agent treating herself in some way. Since the agent is free, it is always possible for her to consent to the way she treats herself.

In the false promising passage Kant appeals not only to the idea that another cannot consent to the way an agent is treating her, but also to the idea that the other "cannot contain the end" the agent is pursuing:

He who has it in mind to make a false promise to others sees at once that he wants to make use of another human being *merely as a means*, without the other at the same time containing in himself the end. For, he whom I want to use for my purposes by such a promise cannot possibly agree to my way of behaving toward him, and so himself contain the end of this action [*G* 4: 429–430].

Kant intimates that if another cannot contain or, less awkwardly, have the end an agent has in treating her in some way, then the agent treats the other merely as a means. Two agents presumably have a particular end if

the following is the case: they are both trying, or at least have both chosen to try, to realize this end. If this is not the case, then they presumably do not each have the end. But what, precisely, does it mean to say that an agent *cannot* have the end another possesses? Returning to the example at hand, what does it mean to say that the promisee cannot himself contain the promisor's end? From the outset it is important to specify precisely which of the promisor's ends the promisee cannot have. It is presumably the promisor's end of getting money from the promisee without ever paying it back. For the promisor's *ultimate* end might be that of diminishing child mortality, and there seems to be no reason why the two cannot both have that end. But it remains unclear just what sense of "cannot" Kant is invoking (or should invoke) in suggesting that a promisee cannot possess the false promisor's end.

Perhaps Kant's view is that the promisee cannot have the promisor's end in the sense that, in typical cases, it would be practically irrational for him to have this end.¹² (This is admittedly a conjecture. But the alternative to making such conjectures is to leave Kant's account

12 On a reading suggested by Thomas Hill, for Kant the promisee cannot share the promisor's end in that it is *logically impossible* for him to do so (Thomas E. Hill Jr., 2002, "Hypothetical Consent in Kantian Constructivism," in: *Human Welfare and Moral Worth*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 61–95, at pp. 69–70). Suppose the promisor, a borrower, has the end of getting money from the promisee, a lender, without ever paying it back. The borrower makes a false promise in order to secure that end. At the time he makes a loan on the basis of this promise, the lender cannot himself share the end of the borrower's getting the money from him without ever paying it back, goes this reading. If the lender shared the borrower's end, then he would not really be making a loan. For according to our practice, it belongs to the very concept of making a loan, as opposed, say, to giving money away, that one believe that what one disburses will be repaid. Given the aim of arriving at a plausible general account of treating others merely as means, this interpretation of the promisee's inability to share the promisor's end is unhelpful, or so I argue in detail in "Treating Others Merely as Means." For one thing, the interpretation renders uninteresting any generalization from the promising case. Suppose for a moment that a sufficient condition for an agent's treating another merely as a means is that it is logically impossible for the other to share the end the agent is pursuing in treating her in this way. Paradigmatic cases of treating another merely as a means do not involve such logical impossibility. Take, for example, a loiterer who threatens an innocent passerby with a gun in order to get \$100. The sort of sufficient condition for treating another merely as a means that we seek should allow us to conclude that the loiterer is treating the passerby merely as a means; for he is mugging her. But the sufficient condition on the table does not do this. It is improbable, but still logically possible, that the passerby shares the loiterer's end of his getting \$100.

extremely vague). In typical cases, it would be irrational for the promisee to try to realize the end of making a loan that is never repaid. For this end's being brought about would prevent him from attaining other ends he is pursuing, ends such as buying new rose bushes, saving money for retirement, and, of course, just plain getting his money back. The notion of irrationality at work here is familiar. In the *Groundwork*, Kant seems to embrace what Hill calls "the hypothetical imperative"¹³, namely a principle that goes roughly like this: If you will an end, then will the means to it that are necessary and in your power, or abandon the end. Kant implies that the hypothetical imperative is a principle of reason: all of us are rationally compelled to abide by it.¹⁴ An agent would act contrary to the hypothetical imperative and thus irrationally by willing an end yet, at the same time, willing another end, the attainment of which would, he is aware, make it impossible for him to take the otherwise available means to his original end. An agent would violate the hypothetical imperative, for example, by willing to buy a car yet, at the same time, willing to use the money he reserved for the down payment to make a gift to his nephew. The Kantian hypothetical imperative implies that it is irrational to will to be thwarted in attaining ends that one is pursuing. In typical cases, if a promisee willed the end of a false promisor, she would be doing just that.

Against the background of this example, we might interpret Kant to be claiming the following: If another cannot have the end an agent is pursuing in treating her in some way, then the agent treats the other merely as a means. The other cannot have the agent's end when the other cannot pursue it without practical irrationality of the kind we have just described. A sufficient condition for the moral impermissibility of using another is that it be done to attain an end that the other cannot have.

Are we able to adapt this account to cases of an agent's treating himself in some way? At the outset we might claim that if an agent cannot (rationally speaking) have the end he is pursuing in treating himself in some way, then the agent treats himself merely as a means. An agent cannot have this end just in case he cannot pursue it without practical irrationality – in particular without willing to be thwarted in his pursuit of some other end he has.

13 Thomas E. Hill Jr., 1992, "The Hypothetical Imperative," in: *Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant's Moral Theory*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 17–37.

14 For discussion in the *Groundwork*, see [G 4: 413–418].

Unfortunately, this account suffers from a serious problem. Suppose that a very rich person has the end of being the world's richest. But after taking a long trip to Africa, he decides to donate anonymously a large sum to a famine relief organization. He realizes that making the donation will prevent him from becoming the world's richest. Nevertheless, he refuses to give up his end. This person is undoubtedly behaving irrationally. But the account implies implausibly that his behavior is also morally wrong. For, according to it, he is treating himself merely as a means. In his giving away his money, he is willing to be thwarted in attaining his end of being the richest person on the planet. It would be easy to multiply cases such as this. The difficulty arises because in pursuing ends that are, intuitively speaking, very worthy, an agent might be thwarting his attainment of neutral or even bad ends.

In order to avoid this difficulty, we need to modify the account. I suggest the following: If an agent cannot have the end he is pursuing in treating himself in some way, then the agent treats himself merely as a means. An agent cannot have this end just in case – and here's the modification – he cannot pursue it without thwarting the pursuit of some end that he is *rationally compelled* to have. Of course, according to Kant our agent is not rationally compelled to have the end of being the richest person on earth. So he would not be treating himself merely as a means in donating a large sum to famine relief. In my view, this account coheres well with how Kant employs the notion of treating oneself merely as a means in his derivations of perfect duties to oneself. In the next section we will examine three of these derivations. There we will find some examples of ends that, in Kant's view, we are rationally compelled to have.

IV.

Let us begin with Kant's derivation of a duty not to kill oneself. Kant appeals to the notion that in killing oneself, one would be treating oneself merely as a means:

To annihilate the subject of morality in one's own person is to root out the existence of morality itself from the world, as far as one can, even though morality is an end in itself. Consequently, disposing of oneself as a mere means to some discretionary end is debasing humanity in one's person (*homo noumenon*), to which the human being (*homo phaenomenon*) was nevertheless entrusted for preservation [MM 6: 423].

Morality is an end in itself, and without humanity, there would be no morality, Kant implies; for humanity is the “subject” of morality. Kant obviously also holds that humanity is an end in itself (e.g., [MM 6: 434–435], [G 4: 435]). Since it is, we are rationally compelled to view it as something “which must never be acted against” [G 4: 437]. Refraining from destroying humanity must be one of our ends. Now suppose that an agent is in pain, with no prospect of its abating as long as he lives. He has an end, namely that his suffering stop. Kant would call this a “discretionary end,” which, I take it, is an end that an agent is not rationally compelled to have. In pursuing the end by killing himself, the agent would obviously be treating himself in some way. According to our interpretation, a person treats himself merely as a means if he does something to himself in pursuit of an end that he cannot himself have. That a person cannot have an end does not on this interpretation entail that it is impossible for him to adopt it, of course. A person cannot have an end, rather, if his willing it would be practically irrational in the sense of thwarting his attainment of some other end that he is rationally compelled to have. But in this case his willing the end that his suffering abate would clearly be practically irrational in this sense. In taking the means to his end, that is, in killing himself, the agent would render himself unable to attain an end that he is rationally compelled to have, namely that of refraining from destroying humanity. So it is not hard to see why, according to Kant, the agent would be treating himself merely as a means.

It is much more difficult to discern how, in performing certain sexual acts an agent would be treating himself in this way. Kant suggests that a desire to masturbate and thus masturbation itself are unnatural: “Lust is called *unnatural* if one is aroused to it not by a real object but by his imagining it, so that he himself creates one, contrapurposively; for in this way imagination brings forth a desire contrary to nature’s end ...” [MM 6: 425]. “Nature’s end” refers to the preservation of the species. From a contemporary perspective, Kant’s reasoning here is puzzling, even if we grant the legitimacy of thinking in terms of nature’s having an end. For a given end is presumably contrary to nature’s end only if the former’s realization prevents, or diminishes the likelihood of, the latter’s realization. But to many of us it seems odd to think that masturbation interferes with reproduction.

In Kant’s time, however, it was a common view. In 1759, the well-respected French physician S. A. D. Tissot published *Onanism*, an 18th

century best-seller that soon appeared in German.¹⁵ Tissot offers an extensive list of maladies that in his view stem from masturbation. They include pimples, weakness, gastrointestinal distress, shortness of breath, and loss of memory (Tissot, 1985: 26–27). Tissot also writes of “the indifference which this infamous practice leaves for the lawful pleasures of Hymen, even when their inclinations and powers still remain; an indifference which does not only induce many to embrace a life of celibacy, but even accompanies the nuptial bed” (Tissot, 1985: 43). Tissot was far from alone in decrying the ills of masturbation.¹⁶ According to medical authorities contemporary with Kant, even if the practitioner of masturbation is physically able to reproduce, which is not a given in light of the many maladies that stem from the activity, he or she might simply lack any desire to do so.

In any case, Kant tells us that it is “not so easy to produce a rational proof” that masturbation is a violation of a duty to oneself. He then says that the “*ground of proof* is ... that by it the human being surrenders his personality (throwing it away), since he uses himself merely as a means to satisfy an animal impulse” [MM 6: 425]. In masturbating, an agent does seem to use himself as a means to sensual satisfaction. But why does Kant think he uses himself *merely* as a means? In bending down to smell a rose, an agent also uses himself (e.g., his olfactory capacity) as a means to sensual satisfaction. Yet this agent does not presumably use himself merely as a means. Why not?

Kant does not offer an explicit answer to this sort of question. Nevertheless, against the background of the views on masturbation prevalent at Kant’s time, an initial answer suggests itself. In masturbating, an agent undoubtedly treats himself as a means to gratify a certain animal impulse. He treats himself *merely* as a means for the following reason: in willing in this way to satisfy the animal impulse he destroys or diminishes

15 S. A. D. Tissot, 1985 [1766], *Onanism*, transl. by A. Hume, New York: Garland. For a discussion of the importance of Tissot’s work, see Thomas W. Laqueur, 2003, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*, New York: Zone Books, pp. 37–40.

16 For discussion see Laqueur, 2003, pp. 25–63. Laqueur points out (60) that in 1786 the *Berliner Monatsschrift*, which had earlier published Kant’s prize competition essay “What is Enlightenment?”, solicited for another competition papers on the topic “How children and young people can be spared the physically and spiritually devastating vices of unchastity in general and onanism in particular, or, insofar as they are already infected by these vices, how they can be healed.”

his ability to reproduce, according to 18th century experts. But since the reproduction of the human species is “nature’s end,” each individual is rationally compelled to have this end, continues this answer. So the agent behaves in a practically irrational manner. In typical cases, an agent’s using himself in order to smell a rose is not practically irrational; in using himself in this way he would not be willing to be thwarted in the pursuit of any end that he is rationally compelled to embrace.

Kant does not make this argument, to my knowledge. In any case, it is implausible to claim that everyone, including a postmenopausal woman or an infertile man, is rationally compelled to have the end of reproducing. This claim seems to run afoul of Kant’s dictum that ought implies can (e.g., [*CPrR* 5: 159]). But Kant seems to reject even the view that every fertile person must have the end of reproducing: “The end of begetting and bringing up children may be an end of nature, for which it implanted the inclinations of the sexes for each other; but it is not *requisite* for human beings who marry to make this their end in order for their union to be compatible with rights, for otherwise marriage would be dissolved when procreation ceases” [*MM* 6: 278]. Granted, that failure to have the end of procreation is compatible with rights does not itself entail that it is compatible with morality. But in the Doctrine of Virtue, Kant does not set out procreation as an imperfect, let alone as a perfect, duty.

An initial answer to the question of why, according to Kant, masturbation amounts to treating oneself merely as a means, whereas smelling a rose does not, has turned out to be unsatisfactory. But this answer suggests a related one that might capture at least part of Kant’s thinking.

I mentioned that leading physicians of Kant’s time believed that masturbation had deleterious effects on health. According to Tissot (1985: 75–76), one of these effects was an inability to focus on any project:

A great number of young people are hereby greatly prejudiced, even when their faculties are not entirely destroyed, by their use being prevented. In whatever vocation a person is engaged, some degree of attention is required, which this pernicious practice renders him incapable of... I could enumerate those, whom this incapacity of fixing to any particular thing, joined to the decay of the faculties, had incapacitated to make a decent appearance in society. Shocking fate! which places man beneath the brute creation.¹⁷

17 Kant says that unnatural vice “debases [a human being] beneath the beasts” [*MM* 6: 425].

Perhaps, in accordance with Tissot, Kant believed that masturbation brought about significant impairment of rational capacities.

If so, we can with the help of our procedural account pinpoint the sense in which an agent who engages in masturbation treats himself merely as a means, according to Kant. As we found in our discussion of suicide, we are, according to him, rationally compelled to have humanity's preservation as an end. But in using himself (masturbating) in order to gain sensual pleasure, an agent would, in effect, be willing to be thwarted in preserving his humanity, that is, his rational nature. For he would be damaging his capacity to pursue ends – a capacity that is central to his rational nature. By contrast, in using his nose as a means to get pleasure from a rose, an agent would not be willing to be thwarted in preserving his humanity. So he would not be treating himself *merely* as a means.

On the interpretation just offered, an agent treats himself merely as a means in masturbating in essentially the same way as he does in committing suicide. He is rationally required to have the end of preserving his rational nature. In both cases, in treating himself in some way in order to secure pleasure or avoid pain, he in effect wills to be hindered in preserving it. But Kant holds masturbation to be even lower than suicide [*MM* 6: 425]. According to him, “someone who defiantly casts off life as a burden is at least not making a feeble surrender to animal impulse in throwing himself away: murdering oneself requires courage...” [*MM* 6: 425]. Kant seems to hold that engaging in masturbation amounts simply to succumbing to inclination. Someone who commits suicide might also succumb to inclination, for example, that to avoid suffering. But she must overcome other inclinations, for example, that to go on living, Kant suggests. So the agent who commits suicide manifests a strength of character lacking in the one who gratifies her “unnatural” lust.

Let us turn now to a third perfect duty to oneself, namely that not to lie. In telling a lie an agent disrespects his humanity, according to Kant. He does so, Kant suggests, by treating himself merely as a means. According to our interpretation, a person treats himself merely as a means if he does something to himself in pursuit of an end such that his doing it thwarts his attainment of something that he is rationally compelled to will. Is there an end that is both such that a person is rationally compelled to it and his lying would prevent him from realizing it?

Kant does not explicitly identify such an end. But he does refer to the “natural purposiveness of the speaker’s capacity to communicate his thoughts” [*MM* 6: 429]. He also says that “the human being as a moral

being (*homo noumenon*) cannot use himself as a natural being (*homo phaenomenon*) as a mere means (a speaking machine), as if his natural being were not bound to the inner end (of communicating thoughts)” [MM 6: 430]. Kant seems to imply in the latter passage that since an agent as *homo phaenomenon* is bound to the end of communicating his thoughts accurately, the agent as *homo noumenon* is rationally compelled also to adopt this end. In short, he holds that an end everyone is rationally compelled to have in communicating his thoughts is to do so accurately [MM 6: 430].

It is now easy to see why, according to Kant, a liar treats himself merely as a means. He cannot pursue the end of the lie’s taking place. For if he does he prevents himself from attaining an end that he is rationally compelled to have, namely that of communicating his thoughts accurately.

V.

Kant employs the notion of using oneself merely as a means in his derivations of three perfect duties to oneself. We have explored the content of this largely neglected notion. On our interpretation, if an agent cannot, rationally speaking, have the end he is pursuing in treating himself in some way, then the agent treats himself merely as a means. An agent cannot have this end just in case he cannot pursue it without practical irrationality – in particular without willing to be thwarted in his pursuit of some end he is rationally compelled to have. This account of treating oneself merely as a means has enabled us to grasp how from the Formula of Humanity Kant derives duties not to kill oneself, not to masturbate, and not to lie. Of course, it is one thing to understand these derivations, but quite another to judge them to be sound. All three raise significant philosophical issues.

The derivations of the duties not to lie and not to defile oneself with lust are open to obvious criticisms. The former rests on the assumption that whenever an agent communicates his thoughts, he is rationally compelled to have as an end to do so accurately. Kant suggests that this assumption is grounded in the “natural purposiveness of the speaker’s capacity to communicate his thoughts”. Yet Kant offers no justification for the notion that the natural end of this capacity is to reflect faithfully the contents of one’s mind. Why couldn’t its natural end, assuming it has one, be something else, say, that of promoting the individual’s survival? In

that case, lying to preserve one's own life would of course not be contrary to the capacity's natural end. Kant's derivation, as interpreted above, of a duty not to masturbate has an even more obvious flaw. It rests on the long since discredited view that masturbation damages an agent's cognitive capacities. 18th century medicine appears not to have served Kant well.

Kant's failure to demonstrate that each of us has a duty to himself never to lie and never to masturbate stems from flaws in how he applies the Formula of Humanity, not necessarily from any shortcoming of the principle itself. Kant says that: "... a metaphysics of morals cannot dispense with principles of application, and we shall often have to take as our object the particular *nature* of human beings, which is cognized only by experience, in order to *show* in it what can be inferred from universal moral principles" [MM 6: 217]. In the two cases at issue, Kant relies on a questionable understanding of the particular nature of human beings in his quest to determine the implications for us of a universal moral principle.

His argument for a duty not to commit suicide raises a different set of difficulties, one of which I will sketch, without venturing to resolve it. The argument, at least as we have reconstructed it, relies on the premise that humanity must never be "acted against." If anything counts as acting against humanity, then destroying it does, it seems. So the premise appears to entail that an agent must never destroy humanity. But what about a case of self-defense? A powerful stranger attacks you suddenly with a knife. With the thought "one of us is going to die and better him than me," you turn your attacker's knife on him and kill him. You have acted against the attacker's humanity, it seems. Yet Kant hints that in his view you have not acted wrongly (see [MM 6: 235]). Or what about an executioner carrying out a death sentence on a convicted murderer? He appears to act against the murderer. Yet Kant makes it plain that in his view capital punishment for murder is justified [MM 6: 334].

One way to respond to these examples is to insist that, despite appearances, neither the executioner nor the victim of attack is really acting against anyone's humanity. An agent counts as acting against humanity only if he acts against a being that has dignity. But both the murderer and the attacker have, through their morally impermissible actions, forfeited their dignity.

On occasion Kant does suggest that dignity is alienable. "By a lie," he says, "a human being throws away and, as it were, annihilates his dignity as a human being. A human being who does not himself believe what he tells another ... has even less worth than if he were a mere thing; for a

thing, because it is something real and given, has the property of being serviceable so that another can put it to some use" [MM 6: 429]. At least at the moment she lies, an agent jettisons her dignity, Kant here seems to imply. He also tells us that by unnatural use of his sexual attribute, a human being "surrenders his personality (throwing it away)" [MM 6: 425]. So at least while "defiling" himself with lust, an agent seems to forfeit his special value. If lying or masturbating can result in a loss of dignity, then it seems reasonable to hypothesize that committing murder or attempted murder can as well.

But the passages in which Kant seems to imply that dignity is alienable do not represent his considered view, in my opinion. For he claims repeatedly that humanity has an unconditional value that is beyond any price (e.g., [G 4: 434–435], [MM 6: 434–435]), at one point saying flatly that "humanity itself is a dignity" [MM 6: 462]. If the value of humanity is unconditional, then it has this value in every possible context in which it exists, including those in which the person who possesses it lies or masturbates. I suspect that in his discussions of persons who do these things Kant engages in a bit of exaggeration. They do not throw away their humanity, but rather, through disrespecting it, treat themselves *as if* they had none.

If this is correct, then Kant faces a challenge. He needs a principled justification for the claim that while an agent acts against himself in committing suicide in order to relieve his suffering, the crime victim and executioner in our examples do not act against anyone. And this justification should not be based on the notion that while the sufferer has dignity, the murderer and attacker do not. Of the three attempts Kant makes to derive a duty to oneself with the help of the notion that it is wrong to treat oneself merely as a means, the most straightforward is that to derive a duty not to kill oneself. But this attempt raises difficult issues concerning the relations between Kant's claims regarding the value of humanity and his claims regarding what we are morally permitted to do to it.