

# Kant on the Dignity of Autonomy and Respect for the Moral Law

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## Introduction

The law giving itself, which determines all worth, must have dignity for that very reason, that is, an unconditional, incomparable worth; and the word *respect* alone provides a becoming expression for the estimate of it that a rational being must give. *Autonomy* is, therefore, the grounds of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature (*GMS*, AA 04: 436).<sup>1</sup>

This passage has been read by some commentators to mean that in virtue of the capacity for reason and freedom, we possess an inner value that cannot diminish no matter what we may do to deserve otherwise. Here, two puzzles arise: first, what is an inner value? Second, what is, or should be treated as, an end in itself? In what follows, I attempt to answer these questions.

Kant writes that “freedom has dignity on account of its independence” (*Refl* 7248, AA 19: 294). Here, Kant’s vocabulary is similar to what he used in the *Groundwork*. There, he says that “in a kingdom of ends whether as a member or as sovereign” (*GMS*, AA 04: 434) through freedom of the will, “a rational being must always regard himself as lawgiving... [who] is a completely independent being” (*GMS*, AA 04: 434). What is suggestive about ‘independence’ is that it becomes a source of inner value, i.e. dignity. By this reasoning, if I am independent, i.e. if I am able to give laws to myself, then I must be seen as possessing dignity and, in turn, I

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<sup>1</sup> References to Kant’s works, with the exception of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, are cited by the volume and page numbers of the German Academy edition: *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*; the *Critique of Pure Reason* is cited in the traditional manner by “A” and “B” pagination of the first and second editions respectively. All translations are taken from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, Cambridge University Press, with the exception of *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, which is taken from Werner S. Pluhar’s translation, published by Hackett Publishing and *Lectures on Natural Law Feyerabend*, taken from Lars Vinx’ translation. Citations from Kant’s texts are taken from the following books: Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*; Kant, *Lectures on Logic*; Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*; Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*; Kant, *Correspondence*; Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*; Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*; Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*; Kant, *Lectures on Natural Law Feyerabend*; Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education*; Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*; Kant, *Notes and Fragments*.

must be intrinsically valuable. But such a reading cannot be adequate because Kant has not explained what he means by inner value at this point (Guyer, 2000, p. 111). We only find an explanation for this aspect in Collins' note on Kant's lectures on *Practical Philosophy and Baumgarten*. There, Kant says "the inner value of the world, the *summum bonum*, is freedom according to a choice that is not necessitated to act. Freedom is thus the inner value of the world" (*V-Anth/Collins*, AA 27: 344).

In the just quoted passage, Kant claims that it is through freedom alone that human beings have the potential to bring value to the world. For him, we can be free of natural necessities on account of freedom alone. Freedom is a powerful concept that can extend and multiply far beyond the natural instincts of animals because animals do not have the capacity to use freedom, but are instead, merely powerful according to choice (*V-Anth/Collins*, AA 27: 344). If all species on the surface of the Earth were to act according to choice, without the capacity for freedom, the world would have no value. But human species have the capacity for freedom, so they possess a dignity that is above all price. Therefore, freedom is the source of inner value in the world.

Based on this submission, some commentators have argued that in virtue of freedom, Kant grants that human beings possess dignity without further conditions having to be met. For instance, they said dignity is not a property that can be realised or lost because it is possessed prior to human life or before the human being becomes a moral being. I argue against this view for two reasons: 1.) freedom is not the ground of the categorical imperative but duty; and 2.) respect for the law is not contradictory to freedom, for freedom presupposes lawfulness, not lawlessness.

### **Autonomy as an Inner Value and End in Itself**

If freedom is intrinsically valuable in itself, could it mean that freedom is an end in itself? In the introduction to the *Naturrecht Feyerabend* lecture note of 1784, which Kant delivered when he was writing the *Groundwork*, Kant began to argue that something must exist that is an end in itself in order for anything in the world to have value as an end. As he puts it "if there existed no end, the means would serve no purpose and would have no value" (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1319). Kant then adds that if something must be regarded as the source of value for mere things, it must be seen as possessing an inner value in itself. That which is the source by which other things can be valuable is a man in virtue of having freedom. As Kant sees it: "Man is an end... Apart from man nothing deserves respect ... Man is an end in himself; he can therefore only have an inner value, i.e., a dignity... [But] man's inner value is based on his freedom, on the fact that he has a will of his own" (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1319).

It is interesting to emphasise that Kant makes this point again in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, which he published in 1790 about six years after his

*Naturrecht Feyerabend* lecture. There, he reemphasised that man (any rational being) under moral law is the source of value in the world. As Kant puts it, “the only conceivable final purpose of a world is the existence of rational beings under moral laws” (*KU*, AA 05: 449-50). Anything contrary to this would render the idea of a purposeful world impossible because “the world can either be based on no purpose at all in the cause or only on purposes without a final purpose” (*KU*, AA 05: 449-50).

Here, it might seem that Kant endorses the ‘New Kant’ account of value (supposing the ‘New Kant’ assumes freedom as the source of value rather than the rational agency).<sup>2</sup> But such a reading of Kant would, again, not be adequate if we are clear about what he means by “inner value”. The use of the notion “inner value” should not be mistaken for an inherent value property or metaphysical property (that is prior to human life or a sort of pre-moral capacity) because Kant did not conceive it as such. In fact, by “inner value”, Kant was merely referring to a ‘special form of judgement’ with respect to our place in nature (Sensen, 2011, p. 41). As I earlier indicated, without the use of freedom by human beings, there would be no value in the world, so human beings are different from the rest of nature in virtue of this special capacity. A man is above all other things in nature but equal with every other human being, who has their own freedom of the will as well as he does. Kant writes: “The will of man, in contrast to his power, is not restricted at all by the whole of nature, except by the will of other human beings, since every human being is itself an end and can therefore not be used merely as a means” (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1319).

In the passage just quoted, Kant is simply saying that lawlessness in the state of nature allows there to be no restriction but the existence of equal possession of freedom of the will, which brings to the fore a restriction, and that is to see fellow human beings as equals who are ends in themselves.

By the *use* of freedom, Kant also believes we can be worthy of everything good and live harmoniously with one another. He essentially connects the use of freedom with morality or moral decency. In his words:

The dignity of a human being (worthiness) rests on the use of freedom, whereby he makes himself worthy of everything good. He makes himself worthy of this good, however, when he also works toward participating in it as much as lies in his natural talents and is allowed by outer agreement with the freedom of others” (*Refl* 6856, AA 19: 181).

Kant went on to say that “moral decency is what is in accordance with the dignity of a rational being” (*Refl* 7038, AA 19: 232). Here, as I understand Kant,

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<sup>2</sup> The characterisation (‘New Kant’) was first indicated by Robert Pippin to categorise commentators who believe Kant places special importance on the value of rational nature, such as the view that the supreme principle of morality and the worth of personhood is grounded on this special value. See, PIPPIN, “Rigorism and the ‘New Kant.’”, 2001.

there is a need to make proper use of freedom before a man can be worthy of everything good. I will return to this argument shortly. In the next few paragraphs, I focus on Kant's emphasis on a 'special form of judgement' in respect of both inner value and not treating rational beings as mere things.

Other things in nature can only be valuable if they are considered merely as the means to something else. In the *Naturrecht Feyerabend* lecture note, Kant says:

All of nature, as far as it is within the reach of his power, is subjected to the will of man [except an equal possessor of freedom of the will]. From the point of view of reason, the things in nature can only be regarded as means to ends. Because it is impossible to conceive of the value of other things other than by regarding them as a means to further ends (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1319; see also, *GMS*, AA 04: 428, 461).

It must be stressed here that, once again, Kant's emphasis is merely about a 'special form of judgement', rather than the inherent value that we possess. We can make sense of the emphasis on judgement when we consider the *Groundwork* and the *Metaphysics of Morals* together. In both these works, Kant's insistence was that we should regard other rational beings as equals, and to say that human beings possess inner value is another way of saying that they have superiority over other creatures in nature, and since this value is equally possessed, no one must be held in *contempt*; rather they should be respected in virtue of their capacity to use freedom and reason (*MS*, AA 06: 462 my emphasis; see also *MS*, AA 06: 236, 402, 409; *GMS*, AA 04: 428).

That said, Kant emphasised again the need to discontinue the means-end series by establishing an end in itself in the *Naturrecht Feyerabend* lecture note. Something that must serve as the source of value for conditionally valuable things, "must be good in itself, a *bonum a se* and not be good from another, *Bonum ab alio*" (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1321). It follows that something that is itself value-neutral cannot create value *ex nihilo* (Guyer, 2000, p. 152). Kant writes:

[Something must exist that] is an end in itself, ...[because] it is impossible that all things exist as mere means, [the existence of something that is an end in itself] is as necessary in the system of ends as an *ens a se* is necessary in the progression of efficient causes. A thing that is an end in itself is a *bonum a se*. Something that can only be regarded as a means has value as a means only if it is used as such. But this requires a being that is an end in itself. In nature, one thing is a means for some other things, and this goes on and on. It is, therefore, necessary to conceive of a thing at the end of the progression that is an end in itself. Otherwise, the progression would not have an end (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1321).

The source of value for conditionally valuable things that is an end in itself is nothing but a man. As earlier quoted, Kant says "man's inner value is based on his freedom, on the fact that he has a will of his own ... [But] the freedom of man is the condition under which man can be an end in himself" (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1319-20). (Kant also made this point in the *Groundwork* where he rationalised the

existence of something as an “absolute value” and an “end in itself” that could make the categorical imperative possible by being its grounds – see *GMS*, AA 04: 428). Although it seems from the quoted passages (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1319-21) that Kant has affirmed that freedom is the grounds for man’s status as an end in itself, he is yet to provide an explanation for the unconditional and incomparable value. Before providing the explanation, we first need to clarify that Kant’s use of “*Bonum a se*” is not an indication of a value claim (Sense, 2011, p. 41). Rather, he believes that by first recognising freedom as a *bonum a se*, it can play a role in developing an argument to justify why we should always give respect to others. But the explanation as to why we should not treat people merely as a means still needs further argument.

Kant’s argument was not so clear in the *Groundwork* about the need not to treat people merely as a means but as ends. In the *Groundwork*, Kant provides us with the humanity formulation: “So, act that you use 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” (*GMS* 4:429).

However, clarity as to why only surfaced after Kant “makes the intuitive idea of the absolute value of the good will into an unconditional and incomparable dignity of autonomy” (Guyer, 2000, p. 153). This is the idea of a lawgiver who set laws freely through reason for himself. We find a clue in *Groundwork II*, where Kant stated that: “Now in this way, a world of rational as a kingdom of ends is possible, through the giving of their own laws by all persons as members” (*GMS* 4:438). The explanation of why we should not treat people merely as a means is illuminated in the introduction to *Naturrecht Feyerabend* lecture note if we read it together with the *Groundwork*.<sup>3</sup> In both of these works, Kant affirms the categorical imperative by stating the justification for never treating people merely as a means is that the will of man requires the restriction to the conditions of the universal agreement so that the freedom of one person can coexist with the freedom of others, but the will of man cannot be restricted by no means in nature, “except by the will of other men, since every man is itself an end and can therefore never be a mere means” (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1319).

The passage just quoted clarifies Kant’s statement in the *Groundwork* (*GMS*, AA 04: 438), quoted earlier, where he says:

A rational being must always regard himself as lawgiving in a kingdom of ends possible through freedom of the will... Reason accordingly refers every maxim of the will as giving universal law to every other will and also to every action toward oneself, and does so not for the sake of any other practical motive or any future advantage but from the idea of the dignity of a rational being, who obeys no law other than that which he himself at the same time gives (*GMS*, AA 04: 434).

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<sup>3</sup> I mean (*GMS*, AA 04: 429, 434 with *V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1319).

He went further in that passage to claim that man has a special property or absolute value, i.e. a dignity that makes him above all price and without equivalent, to such an extent that he cannot be put up for any “market price” (*GMS*, AA 04: 434) or “be subjected to rational trade-off” (Hill, 1992, p. 157). If the quoted passages from the *Groundwork* are read in isolation, those who hold that Kant is referring to a metaphysical property would be more emboldened (Schönecker & Schmidt, 2018; Schmidt & Schönecker, 2017). But Kant’s justification for treating others as ends and never merely as a means rests solely on universality and not on a metaphysical property.

My argument is built on the claim expressed by Kant in the *Groundwork* which was not very clear until the *Metaphysics of Morals* and his *Naturrecht Feyerabend* lecture note. Kant writes:

Morality consists, then, in the reference of all action to the lawgiving by which alone a kingdom of ends is possible. This lawgiving must, however, be found in every rational being himself and be able to arise from his will, the principle of which is, accordingly: to do no action on any other maxim than one such that it would be consistent with it to be a universal law (*GMS*, AA 04: 434).

Kant had begun contemplating the need for a restriction of freedom in an earlier passage in the *Groundwork I*. There, he asked, if anyone wills that his maxim become a universal law. If no one wills that,

It must be rejected, not because of any disadvantage accruing to me or even to others, but because it cannot fit as a principle into possible legislation of universal law, for which such legislation forces from me immediate respect” (*GMS*, AA 04: 403, see also, 426).

But it was until the *Metaphysics of Morals* that he talked about constraining freedom in the context of external constraint. There, he argued that the idea of duty alone was a sufficient incentive for a lawgiver to will his maxim to become a universal law (*MM*, AA 06: 220). (Although he had already laid the foundation in the *Groundwork I*, in particular, with the third proposition of morality which says that “duty is the necessity of an action to be done out of respect for the law” – see, *GMS*, AA 04: 400).

In the *Naturrecht Feyerabend* lecture note, however, Kant elucidates further the need for the restriction of freedom in the kingdom of ends through a universal rule. Without the restriction of freedom, freedom of the will of each member of the kingdom of ends cannot coexist. So, “there must be a universal rule under which the freedom of [one member] can coexist [with the freedom of another member]” (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1320). There, Kant poses a question that depicts a lawless state of condition that the human being would be in if this restriction was not put in place. Suppose I arrive at the library and meet someone who is occupying the place where I like to study and want him to vacate it. Suppose further, that he is already

sitting and studying, both of us cannot occupy the same place at the same time. What if I asked him to vacate it and he refused? What would happen if we were unable to resolve our disagreement over this special place in the library? Kant argues that the restriction of freedom is necessary because of this kind of lawless context. Kant, in fact, illustrates a state of lawlessness as a horrible and frightening state of affairs; just as we see in the case of Robinson Crusoe (Kant illustrates the case of Robinson Crusoe who lived in isolation on a desert island for years but suddenly saw human footprints for the first time, which frightened him so much he was unable to sleep at night – see, *V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1320). In such a state, no one would be free, as everyone would act as they like without a law constraining their excessiveness.

This raises the question about our imperfect rationality, and the need to make a distinction between reason and freedom. Barbara Herman, for example, has argued that it is rational nature, not freedom, that Kant considers as an end in itself. Her insistence hinged on Kant's statement in the *Groundwork* that "rational nature is morality and dignity, insofar it is capable of morality" (*GMS*, AA 04: 435). Rational agency for her is an end in itself and possesses a special fundamental value that makes a human being above all price and permits no room for doubt as to why he should not fulfil his duties or obey the law (Herman, 1981, p. 367, 374). Her account of the rational agency has been contested by Paul Guyer who observed that, for Kant, freedom rather than rational nature is what should be treated as an end in itself (Guyer, 1996). In actual fact, in the *Naturrecht Feyerabend* lecture note, Kant points out that "while only rational beings can be ends in themselves, they can be ends in themselves not because they have reason, but because they have freedom" (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1321).

Accordingly, human reason should be considered as a means to preserve and promote our freedom. Since we possess imperfect rationality, it is very possible that we will act from reason (without freedom) in accord with the universal laws of nature in a similar manner that animals act from instinct. But if a man's reason is composed in accordance with the universal laws of nature, his will is not free but determined by nature. If his actions stem from the mechanism of nature, he is not a free being because his actions are necessitated by external forces. In order for his actions to be autonomous and from his own will, they must be in accordance with universal freedom or on account of the universal rule. This is why Kant says human freedom must conform to the universal law; otherwise, freedom would be lawless instead.

To guarantee lawfulness, Kant argues that there is a need for every human being to elevate himself above the mere laws of nature. The possibility of this can only come from rules that are imposed upon himself. Unlike the kingdom of nature, in the kingdom of ends, the rational being is referenced as its ends "through rules prescribe by the categorical imperative" (*GMS*, AA 04: 438). Kant explains this point in the *Groundwork* as a 'paradox of autonomy':

The mere dignity of humanity as rational nature, without any other end or advantage to be attained by it – hence respect for a mere idea – is yet to serve as an inflexible precept of the will, and that it is just in this independence of maxims from all such incentives that their sublimity consists, and the worthiness of every rational subject to be a lawgiving member in the kingdom of ends; for otherwise he would have to be represented only as subject to the natural law of his needs. (*GMS*, AA 04: 439).

In the just quoted passage, Kant harmonises his conception of autonomy with a kingdom of ends in order for him to establish the possibility of free wills that are not only externally related, but also constrained through reciprocal lawgiving. It is on this account that it is possible to elucidate the possibility of human beings having external relations that are ends-in-themselves without seeking the foundational basis outside human reason (Shell, 2013, p. 116).

It is noteworthy that, in the same passage (*GMS*, AA 04: 439), Kant also talks about the justification for respecting persons as ends and never as mere means. The justification lies in the characterisation of our autonomy as “sublimity”, i.e. elevating ourselves above mere laws of nature to make our maxim a universal law. In so doing, we are accepting lawfulness over lawlessness, and accepting the obligation to always respect the law. As Kant puts it: “the respect for the law rests on account that this is the condition of the possibility of the action’s being subject to universal laws” (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1327).

Kant believes that our actions must be done in agreement with a universal rule, that is, it must originate from duty alone and out of respect for the moral law without there being incentives for the sake of inclination. But the underlying motivation to respect the moral law is yet to be explained. Some commentators have argued that the inner value of a man is independent of his adherence to the moral law. This view is shared differently by Kantian scholars. In what follows, I consider the following questions: if we can only elevate ourselves above the mere laws of nature by giving respect to the moral law, how possibly can the moral law become a mere means to preserve and promote our freedom? Can freedom be intrinsically valuable without adherence to the moral law? I argue that if we fail to yield to the commands of the moral law, we are committing a transgression of duty and of the moral laws – which negates the very reason why the restriction of freedom is necessary in the first place.

## Respect for the Law

For Kant, the idea of duty and moral laws are prioritised as a necessity in order to guarantee that freedom of one can *coexist* with the freedom of all. Kant believes that the moral law is indispensable and necessary as an imperative to regulate the affairs of human beings, specifically to ensure that the use of freedom is conducted under a law. According to Kant, the moral law is an absolute necessity



that must be universal. After establishing the need for a law that is both necessary and universal, Kant went on to demonstrate that the moral law itself exists and is not a mere “chimerical concept” or “phantom of the brain”.

He begins with the claim of the absolute necessity of the moral law in the *Groundwork* that “everyone must admit that law if it is to hold morally, that is, as a ground of an obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity” (*GMS*, AA 04: 389). The categorical imperative of the absolute necessity of the moral law runs through many of Kant’s writings. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, for example, Kant emphasises that “morality of actions is posited in their necessity from duty and from respect for the law” (*KpV* AA 05: 81). He also stresses this in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, stating that: “laws proceed from the will...[and] the will directs with absolute necessity” (*MS*, AA 06: 226). Similarly, in the excerpt of his letter to Johann Gottfried K. C. Kiesewetter, Kant specifies that “...the criterion of a genuine moral principle is its unconditional practical necessity” (*Br*, AA 11: 154-5). This shows the level of importance that Kant places on the necessity of the law. But why is the moral law unconditionally necessary?

For Kant, the imperfect nature of our rationality is responsible for the absolute necessity of the moral law. He believes that we belong, as rational beings, to the intelligible world where we can cognise our causality of the will as autonomy (in the positive sense), with its consequence, morality; against a freedom of the will that is merely presupposed as independence from heteronomy by means of which human beings see themselves as beings under an obligation that does not result from themselves (*GMS*, AA 04: 453). Because the human will is guided by imperfect reason, we need a moral law to determine our will through the moral necessitation of our actions. For this reason, all rational beings must make “practical use of their reason with regards to freedom” (*GMS*, AA 04: 463), and it is a fundamental principle that every rational being uses his reason to be conscious of the absolute necessity of the law.

Kant, however, provides an exception to the absolute necessity of the moral law. This exception, I believe, has led to some commentators suggesting that the necessity of the law is not found in every instance, that it ought to be indispensable only in a special manifestation in our lifetime, not a usual manifestation (Pippin, 2000, p. 242). But if we look at the exception that is given by Kant, it is rare to see how human beings can be maximally perfect to the level of the moral standard that is attached to the exception. According to Kant, the moral laws are not obligatorily forcible; they are only so when the will of rational beings is good in itself. Since all human beings live under the influence of inclination, our will cannot be good in itself, for our actions will originate from inclination and not from duty; and when the will is under the influence of inclination, the absolute necessity of the law would be discounted. For this reason, “we must act solely, without the least incentives from inclination, but only from duty and out of respect for the moral law” (*V-*

*NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1326; see also, *KpV*, AA 05: 81). It follows that the moral law should determine the will by itself, because only when action is performed from duty can it have moral worth. So, the purpose of the universal moral law is to oblige the rational being to act from duty alone.

This point was stressed in the *Groundwork*, the *Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. For Kant, morality is the relation of actions to the free will, that is, the possibility of a will giving universal law to itself (that can be adopted by others) through its own maxims. In this way, only actions that can coexist with the free will are allowed and those which do not are disallowed (*GMS*, AA 04: 439). For a will to be good in itself, it is a rule that its maxims are in accordance with the laws of freedom. We can neither rely on the principle of a free will that is not good in itself nor attribute actions resulting from it to a perfect or a holy being. Thus, moral necessitation of obligation is absolutely necessary for imperfect beings. As Kant puts it in the *Critique of Practical Reason*:

For the will of a maximally perfect being the moral law is a law of holiness, but for the will of every finite being it is a law of duty, of moral necessitation, and of the determination of his actions through respect for that law and from reverence for his duty (*KpV*, AA 05: 82; see also, *GMS*, AA 04: 439 and *MS*, AA 06: 379,397).

Kant went on to provide us with a categorical conclusion in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, that: “Hence an imperative is a rule, the representation of which makes necessary an action that is subjectively contingent and thus represents the subject as one that must be constrained or necessitated to conform with the rule” (*MS*, AA 06: 222). We should not forget that Kant, here, is still very concerned with a rational being who is free from natural necessities. His own desires and needs add nothing to his inner value, so in judging his own worth, he must be disinterested in external relations; instead, he should be merely interested in the internal relations of himself. An imperfect being can only increase his inner value by “solely giving respect for the moral law, as an incentive which can give an action moral value” (*GMS*, AA 04: 440).

Still, one may be curious as to where the free will originates from or how it is possible at all. As I understand Kant, freedom of the will arises from the imperative of duty which commands the moral law categorically. The absolute necessity of the law for every human being is to restrict his freedom and make him subject to the moral necessitation – to have respect for the law under the command and prohibition of the categorical imperative of duty. Thus, it is on account of the imperative of duty which commands categorically that freedom is possible in the first place.

To further his argument, Kant added there is a need for a universal moral principle. As noted earlier, Kant accentuated this argument in the *Naturrecht Feyerabend* lecture note that there is a need for lawfulness. He made a similar appeal in the *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*. There, Kant lay

emphasis on “*antagonism*” in society, that is, “*unsociable sociability* of human beings” (*IaG*, AA 08: 20). Because of this “*antagonism*” and “*thoroughgoing resistance*” in society, there are tendencies that human beings would have unending disagreement and conflict, that is, the propensity to draw into their shell or isolate themselves because of an *antagonistic* predisposition in them, but at the same time, they also have an inclination to socialise with one another (for they are “social animals”, as Aristotle would say) as part of their wellbeing, because only then do they feel themselves as wholly being (*IaG*, AA 08: 20-21; see also, *KU*, AA 05: 473-4). To counter the antagonistic predisposition of man, there is a need for a universal rule to regulate human affairs and restrict their freedom in society. Kant calls the need for universal rules: the “greatest necessity of all” (*IaG*, AA 08: 22) and the “objective necessity” (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1322; see also, *GMS*, AA 04: 439).

There is nothing more terrible than a society in which all members are free without a law regulating their conducts (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1320). For this reason, “there is the need for precise determination... of freedom, so that freedom of one person can coexist with the freedom of others” (*IaG*, AA 8: 22; see also, *V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1320) because the action of one person must be able to coexist with the freedom of all in accordance with the universal law (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1332). But how is the restriction of freedom possible? Kant argued that it is only through the conception of morality that we can restrict the freedom of all persons. He believed that the restriction of freedom can only be made possible through a universal rule. As he put it: “there has to be a universal rule under which the freedom of all can coexist” (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1320). This is the reason why Kant argued for the necessity and universality of morality, but he did not tell us whether morality really exists or whether it is merely a “chimerical concept” or “phantom of the brain”.

The centrality of Kant’s thought on necessity and universality of morality lies in his claim that morality really exists (Sensen, 2013, p. 260). In the *Groundwork II*, Kant takes on the question of whether universal moral law really exists, to reemphasise the importance of the principle of freedom. But he offers three possibilities: First, he considers freedom of the will as a condition for its logical possibility. Second, freedom of the will is also required by the moral law as a condition of its transcendental possibility. Third, on account of a “fact of reason,” the freedom of the will is attested to have objective reality. Kant presents these three principal texts in the *Groundwork II* and *III*, and the “Analytic” of the *Critique of Practical Reason* (Carnois, 1987, p. 46).

Since the primary objective of the *Groundwork* was to find the grounds of moral principle, autonomy there simply refers to the law being sufficient as a stimulus for the autonomous will (*GMS*, AA 04: 433, 450) (Sensen, 2013, p. 266) because the moral law requires the idea of freedom as a universal lawgiving will for its own logical possibility. It is impossible without autonomy to think that a rational

being would submit to a universal law without losing out and being an end in itself. In this way, Kant uses freedom of the will to harmonise the universal moral law with autonomy. Here, Kant is simply saying that freedom is the *ratio essendi* of the moral law. He claimed that we can demonstrate, through our development of the idea of universal moral principle, that autonomy of the will is inextricably tied to it, and that it is its basis.

### The Reciprocity Thesis

In the *Groundwork III* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant formally introduces the “reciprocity thesis” to claim that morality and freedom are identical (Allison, 1990, p. 201). The thesis reads: “a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same” (*GMS*, AA 04: 447 and *KpV*, AA 05: 29). To elucidate Kant’s “reciprocity thesis”, I shall present Paul Guyer’s explanation of this thesis. First, Guyer claims that Kant seems to have argued that autonomy (by eliminating the laws of nature) is identical to the moral law. In this sense, adherence to the moral law may be assumed to be valuable, but it should not be confused with fundamental moral value because adherence to the moral law is not, in itself, valuable. Rather, it only becomes intrinsically valuable if freedom is expressed in and through it (Guyer, 2000, p. 155). It follows that freedom is required, at least, for adherence to the moral law to be valuable. This means that elevation pertains not mere adherence to the law for whatever purpose, but “conformity to the law that is freely chosen. Freedom without adherence to the moral law may not be intrinsically valuable but adherence to the moral law without freedom would also lack any absolute value” (Guyer, 2000, p. 155-6). This is because absolute value will be incomplete if we do not acknowledge the intrinsic value of free choice, even if we conform to the moral law. In fact, Christiane Korsgaard expresses a similar explanation. She says it is because the moral law is the law of freedom that Kant concludes that “a free will and a will under moral laws are identical” (*GMS*, AA 04: 447) (Korsgaard, 1996, p. 25). In addition, it is because we can freely and rationally choose our ends and actions that existence confers value on us through autonomy (Korsgaard, 1996, p. 240).

Second, Guyer claims that Kant’s paradigmatic deontology collapses because the moral law merely serves as a means to preserve and promote freedom. Guyer argues that: “all human beings must be treated as ends in themselves, the sheer fact of adherence to universal law is not an end in itself but is rather the means to the realisation of the human potential for autonomy or freedom in both choice and action.” (Guyer, 2000, p. 1)

Two things are embedded in these texts. First, that dignity is possessed, regardless of the moral worthiness or unworthiness of the bearer’s actions. Second, that it is only through the laws that a rational agent has freely given to himself can he realise, preserve and promote the fundamental value of freedom. It implies that

the moral law is to serve no other purpose than a mere means to preserve, realise and promote freedom; and it is invaluable in itself.

The popular interpretation of the “reciprocity thesis” seems to draw from these two accounts. It is believed that conformity with the moral law without freedom lacks intrinsic value in itself and that the moral law is a mere means and freedom is an end in itself. That intrinsic value of freedom does not require conformity with the moral law because the moral law is to be used as a means to preserve and promote freedom. Freedom is intrinsically valuable in itself, and the moral law is merely formulated as a means for our freedom to be valuable (Guyer, 2000, p. 2; Reath, 2003, p. 128). Allen Wood, for example, has argued that the moral law is not binding because freedom is *ratio essendi* of the moral law; the grounds of the moral law revolve around a free will that is a subject of the law, and this leaves no room for why it is he should adhere to the law. Wood suggests that the authority of the law lies solely in the rationality of its content. He writes: “the idea of autonomy identifies the authority of the law with the value constituting the content of the law, in that it bases the law on our esteem for the dignity of rational nature in ourselves, which makes every rational being an end in itself.” (Wood, 1999, p. 1)

Therefore, the moral law is merely a principle of autonomy because the fundamental value of freedom precedes the moral law. I contend here that adherence to the moral law is categorical for Kant and not hypothetical, with no exceptions.

I shall begin by stating that the value of persons is on account of morality. And the fact that morality is grounded in autonomy should not diminish our respect for moral laws, rather it should increase our motivation to act in accordance with it (Wilson, 2009, p. 170; 2013, p. 241). Kant, in the *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, provides us with an explanation as to why human beings construe the moral laws as a mere means. There, he was talking about the origin of evil and propensity to it, which he says does not start from freedom, but from the transgression of the moral law. To capture his arguments firmly, I shall, therefore, quote a long text therein:

The moral law **preceded** the human being as a prohibition, as indeed it must with him as a being who is not pure but is tempted by inclinations. Now, instead of straightforwardly following this law as a sufficient incentive (which alone is unconditionally good, so that there is also no place for any further qualms), the human being did look around for yet other incentives, incentives that can be good only conditionally (namely insofar as the law is not infringed by them); and he made it his maxim – if one thinks of the action as arising consciously from freedom – to follow the law of duty not from duty but perhaps also from a concern for other aims. Thus, he began to doubt the strictness of the command that excludes the influence of any other incentive, and thereafter began to use subtle reasoning to downgrade his obedience to the command to an obedience merely conditional (under the principle of self-love) as a means, so that finally the preponderance of the sensible impulses over the incentive from the law was admitted into the maxim of action, and thus [transgression came to be] (RGV, AA 06: 42).

In the text just quoted, Kant emphatically argues that the moral law precedes the human being and must be respected categorically because it is a sufficient incentive in itself that is unconditionally good. But the nature of human beings means they use their free choice to formulate maxims from a concern for another purpose and allow this to be their incentive for action. From this, they downgrade the moral law to the condition of their choice and conceive the law as a means and not the end. In so doing, human beings are committing a transgression of duty and of the moral law.

### Feeling of Duty and Moral Feeling

Kant went further in the *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* to talk about the perception that people have of transgressions of the moral law in the form of a “feeling of duty.” He claims that human beings have an “innate propensity to transgression” of duty which results from the “innate wickedness of our nature.” This propensity is often responsible for our admiration of a “feeling of duty”, that is, the feeling we have whenever we act from duty, as if we have done something spectacular. Kant writes:

Teaching apprentices to admire virtuous actions, no matter how [many sacrifices] that the mind of these actions may have cost, is not yet the right attunement apprentice ought to receive for the morally good. For, no matter how virtuous someone may be, whatever good he can do is yet merely [a] duty; but doing one’s duty is nothing more than doing what is in the usual moral order and hence does not deserve to be admired. On the contrary, this admiration is a mistuning of our feeling for duty, as if paying obedience to duty were something extraordinary and meritorious (*RGV*, AA 06: 48-9).

But if we are conscious of the moral predisposition within us, we will regard our duties as nothing worthy of admiration. The moral predisposition is nothing but the holiness of what resides in us in the idea of duty.

Kant explains this with what he calls “receptivity of the will” and “moral feelings”. As human beings, we may be moved by the moral laws as incentives because of the receptivity of our will. Objective principles determine a moral action and its judgement, but the will is practical and, at the same time, our incentives to act morally are subjective. Our incentives can be necessitated either from inclination or duty because they must originate from reason (which is imperfect). So, we are going to have *moral feelings* insofar as reason itself determines our will. Reason can either prescribe its own interest to the will or the interest of inclination. If it follows the latter, it is subservient. But if it imprints the former, it has the power of an incentive and, in turn, reason is not only autonomous, but also autocratic over the will. In the event of the former, reason has both legislative and executive force over the will. “The autocracy of reason, to determine the will in accordance with the moral

laws, would then be the moral feeling” (*V-Mo/Mron II*, AA 29: 625-6, see also, *GMS*, AA 04: 442; *KpV*, AA 05: 39; *MS*, AA 06: 387/399-40).

Kant links the moral feeling with the possibility of freedom of the will in the *Groundwork*. There, Kant says “the subjective impossibility of explaining the freedom of the will is same as the impossibility of discovering and making comprehensible an interest which the human being can take in the moral law” (*GMS*, AA 04: 459-60). And he argues therein that the human being can only take interest in the moral law through the moral feeling of respecting the law. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant provides information about the source of moral feeling (the moral feeling is regarded by Kant as a moral endowment). He said, “moral feeling proceeds solely from reason, not to judge actions nor serve as the foundation of objective moral law itself but merely as an incentive to the universal moral law, a maxim within oneself” (*KpV*, AA 05: 76). Therefore, moral feeling produces the capacity to take a moral interest in compliance with the law. Kant, however, contrasts it with a pathological feeling that proceeds from an inner sense or a feeling of pleasure. Further, Kant identifies three additional “moral endowments” that are subject conditions of receptiveness to duty: these are “conscience, love of one’s neighbour, and respect for oneself, that is, self-esteem” (*MS*, AA 06: 399). He argues that every human being has them and can be put under an obligation by virtue of them. For the purpose of this present work, I shall limit my discussion of “moral endowments” to moral feeling.

Man really does have the capacity for moral feeling if he is ready to accept the force and necessity of the moral law, and only then. For he possesses within him the grounds of conquering every temptation to transgress. So, Kant uses the concept of moral feeling as an inner reverence for the moral law. Moral feeling is concerned not with law legislation for the will, but rather with the execution of the law; that is, a criterion for the good – the good that its validity must be universal. With moral feeling, I can conceive of myself as a perfect being who does not see the commands of the law as arbitrary but as necessary. It is only due to our imperfect rationality that:

It seems as though, in duty, the will of a legislator underlies, not anything we do by our own will, but what we do by the will of another. Yet this other will is not that of another being; it is only our own will, insofar as we make it general, and regard it as a universal rule. Such a will operates as a universal, not as a private will. My private will often fail to coincide with my will, taken as a universal rule (*V-Mo/Mron II*, AA 29: 627).

### **The consciousness of Freedom and the Necessitation of the Moral Law**

Moreover, the moral law can become a mere means of obtaining consciousness of freedom if, and only if, human beings are conceived as having no laws at all, or these are not binding on them. In addition, to suggest that moral law is only a means to promote freedom is another way of saying that the categorical

imperative is grounded on freedom. It is actually, however, the other way round. To further support this point, I shall quote a long text from Johann Friedrich Vigilantius' lecture note on Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*. There, Kant says:

That this consciousness of freedom should be immediately present in us, is impossible; for were I to possess it, without any preceding cause and the nature of it having led me to freedom and the consciousness thereof, I would be necessitated to moral action without knowing anything of duty or the principle of morality. Thou shalt do this and this, for example; this presupposes, after all, that I know the duty and obligation whereby I am to act; this duty is by its nature absolute, unconditioned and necessary; but what is necessary must certainly be possible; the consciousness of dutiful performance of action must, therefore, be inferred, not immediately, but through a moral imperative of freedom, and the moral consciousness must be derived by me from that. Just to become aware of freedom on its own, without acquaintance with duty, would be so utterly impossible that we would declare such freedom to be absurd; for in that case reason would determine something for which no determining cause would be present; so, the moral law that presents an action as necessary must also provide a cause for it... I now determine myself through my reason; this is freedom, but this reason of mine is determined by a moral law, the very law that necessitates me to overcome the motives of nature. If the determination of my statement now results accordingly, I act freely, not from immediate consciousness, but because I have decided, from the categorical imperative, how I ought to act. There is thus within me a power to resist all sensory incentives, as soon as a categorical imperative speaks. The position, then, is that freedom is known by inference from the moral law and not immediately felt (*V-MS/Vigil*, AA 27: 506-7).

In the texts just quoted, it is obvious that Kant thinks that it is impossible to be conscious of freedom without the moral law's determination of action as its cause, and the possibility of freedom rest solely on this. If a man is free, he is free by means of the law and not of natural necessity. This is because man must necessarily be free whenever the categorical imperative of duty is presupposed in his action (*V-MS/Vigil*, AA 27: 507). By means of the moral law is not the same thing as serving the purpose of freedom without its own intrinsic value.

Kant argues that 'for a man to be conscious of his freedom he must have necessitated himself to duty by means of autonomy of reason' (*V-MS/Vigil*, AA 27: 500-1). Since freedom is not without restriction, it must be determined by grounds that are solely based on form; that is, universality. It is on account of this that human action and willing can stand under the moral law and be unconditionally free; because he is unconstrained by natural laws. Therefore, the moral law is a necessary universal principle for Kant that is meant to restrict the freedom of all and subject them to necessitation through practical reason under the command and prohibition of the imperative of duty.

In fact, Kant holds that the inner value of a man is embedded in duty itself (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1326). He believes that the moral law necessitates through itself and, for that reason, it necessitates from the idea of respect for the law. In so doing, the human being can put his incentive for inclination aside and posit an



absolute value in his actions because “respect is the esteem of a value that restricts all inclination” (*V-NR/Feyerabend*, AA 27: 1326). But it is discerning to ask, how can a law be respected for its own sake and thereby necessitate through itself? For Kant, the human being must be presupposed as having his own will and that will must be a free will. If the will is free, by eliminating the determination of the laws of nature, it cannot remain lawless. Man requires a law that he freely legislates and gives to himself in order to determine itself, and for that reason, he must respect the law.

### Conclusion

The underlying presupposition of this paper is that, for Kant, the justification to never treat people merely as a means is that the will of every rational being requires restriction to the conditions of the universal agreement so that the freedom of one person can coexist with the freedom of others. This is because the restriction of freedom can only be made possible through a universal rule. So I argue in this paper that freedom does require conformity with the moral law in order to be intrinsically valuable because the moral law cannot be used merely as a means to preserve and promote freedom alone, but must be regarded as possessing its own intrinsic value. I provide textual evidence where Kant emphatically argues that the moral law precedes the human being and must be respected categorically because it is a sufficient incentive in itself that is unconditionally good. Finally, I posit that the inner value of the human being is embedded in the categorical imperative of duty, for it is the moral law that necessitates human action through the idea of respect for the law.

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**Abstract:** I explore two claims that are often attributed to Kant: first, that conformity with the moral law without freedom lacks intrinsic value in itself, and second, that the moral law is a mere means to preserve and promote our freedom. In this paper, I investigate whether freedom can be intrinsically valuable without adherence to the moral law. I begin with the examination of what it means for freedom to be thought of as ‘an inner value’ and ‘an end in itself’. I suggest that when Kant uses an expression such as ‘by means of the moral law’, he does not mean that the moral law only serves the purpose of preserving and promoting freedom without its own intrinsic value. Indeed, I provide textual evidence that the moral law precedes freedom and must be respected unconditionally because it is a sufficient incentive that is good in itself. I argue that respect for the law is required in order for freedom to be lawful and without it, it would be lawless.

**Keywords:** Autonomy, Moral Law, Moral Feeling, Feeling of Duty, Value

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