The Imperative of Respect

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"Treat rational beings always as ends in themselves and never merely as means to your own ends." Kant called this version of the categorical imperative the Formula of Humanity. It is also often called the imperative of respect. Kant's argument that it binds all agents categorically has recently been ably interpreted and defended by Christine Korsgaard. My task in this paper is to criticise Kant's argument, at least as I understand it from Korsgaard's discussion.* I don't think Kant establishes that we are all bound categorically to conform our actions to the imperative of respect. But I want also to describe how something like Kant's argument can be used, not to show that we are categorically bound to treat a rational being as an end in herself, but instead to vindicate as rational a person's decided commitment to treat rational beings always as ends. I intend also gently to urge that that is really all anyone should ever want an argument for an ethical principle to do.

1. Just what is it to conform to this imperative?

I think that three sorts of ill-treatment are contrary to this imperative. First of all, to involve people in the pursuit of your own ends without their informed and freely given consent is to treat them merely as means and not also as ends in themselves. We fail to conform to the imperative of respect, then, when, in pursuing an end, we enlist the help of others by deceit or force or threats

of force. Second, to fail to treat with consideration the fact that a person's general ends of self-respect and self-expression are important to her is to fail to treat that person as an end in herself. Going on with one's business when talking to someone or when someone talks to you affronts that person's sense of self-worth, as does failing to return their greeting or snickering at their shoes. Many of the minor cruelties we daily inflict on others, through being rude to them or through mocking their projects and feelings, we inflict on them in violation of the imperative of respect. Third, failing to treat with consideration the fact that a person's specific ends of satisfying her desires and realizing her projects are important to her is again to fail to treat that person as an end in herself. Mindlessly letting the door fall to rather than passing it off to the person behind one contravenes the imperative of respect, as does playing music on a bus or coming late to a meeting. Many of the small burdens we happen to impose on others, burdens we impose by making it more difficult or less enjoyable for them to go about their business, we impose on them in violation of this imperative.

The imperative of respect, then, is very wide in scope. It rules out manipulating others for our own gain, humiliating others or otherwise wounding their sense of self-respect and thereby inflicting emotional harm on them, and burdening others by forcing them to deal with our presence or to pick up after us. What is common to these three forms of ill-treatment, what would make it possible to construct a single argument for an imperative not to engage in them, is that they involve failing to treat others as ends in themselves. The first, ill-treatment through manipulation, involves failing to treat others as ends in themselves while treating them as means to one's own ends, while the second and third involve failing to treat others as ends in themselves even though one is not, or is not necessarily, using them as means to one's own ends.

Of course, it's not always clear in the case of a specific piece of behaviour whether it contravenes the imperative of respect. Much depends on details of the case, particularly the attitudes of the agent whose behaviour is in question. Behaviour is not disrespectful unless stemming from or accompanied by attitudes of indifference or disdain. Furthermore, much depends on the attitudes and expectations of those at the receiving end of the agent's behaviour. We cannot complain that others are failing to treat us with respect when their actions force us to shoulder the ordinary or unavoidable burdens of social life, or when our projects suffer because others, in their guileless endeavours to realize their own projects, happen to deplete resources we would have liked to have used ourselves. A person's oversensitivity or demandingness or sense of entitlement does not itself make another's treatment of her disrespectful, no matter how little she likes that treatment. In fact, those attitudes would instead most likely be the root of the lack of respect she herself would manifest towards that other.

We all have very strong practical reasons not to care to show others respect, and very strong reasons even positively to show them disrespect. In the first place, often projects of our own will suffer should we bother to take the projects and feelings of others into account. To be concerned to manifest respect for others is to forswear a variety of means to our ends—lying, cheating, double-dealing, scheming, threatening, preying on others' weaknesses—, means that might well be efficient and, if we are clever, come at little cost to ourselves. In the second place, our own interests in self-assertion and self-expression are frequently best or most easily served by denigrating the abilities or aspirations of others to their faces. We can achieve much in way of self-assertion or self-expression by being rude or hostile or demeaning. That we cause and suffer

the many minor cruelties we daily do is hard evidence that we are very much motivated to be thoughtless and even malign.

Still, that we have strong reasons not to bother to treat others as ends in themselves is perfectly consistent with our having even stronger reasons to take every effort to treat others well. Just what such reasons might be, and just how strong they can be, is what we will now investigate.

2. Just what is it for an imperative to bind categorically?

"Insert the bottom pegs first." "Pretend to be a tree." "Sit up straight." "Fake toward the baseline, then drive up the middle." "Don't try to get out of trouble by lying." These sentences are, grammatically speaking, sentences in the imperatival mood, as is the imperative of respect quoted at the beginning of this paper. Sentences in the imperatival mood are typically used to offer advice or suggestions or recommendations, and to provide instructions, and to issue orders or commands. It is pretty easy to describe one sort of reason a person could have for conforming to one or another of the imperatives listed above. Anyone who has a desire that would be satisfied or a project that would be advanced were he to conform his behaviour to one of these imperatives—who has a desire or project that would be *efficiently* satisfied or advanced, that is—has a strong practical reason to conform his behaviour to that imperative. Why, I ask, should I insert the bottom pegs first (rather than insert the top pegs first, or leave it unassembled in the basement)? Well, you reply, because you want the thing assembled and assembled correctly, no one else is going to assemble it, and by inserting the bottom pegs first you will increase the chance that it gets assembled correctly in the shortest period of time. Quite right, I agree, and I proceed to insert the

bottom pegs first. Why shouldn't I try to get out of trouble by lying? Well, because by lying you risk getting into other and more serious scrapes later, for lies told to get oneself out of trouble are usually uncovered, and you happen not to want to get into other and more serious scrapes later. Quite right, I agree, and I steel myself to tell the truth.

That one has a strong practical reason for pretending to be a tree, given that pretending to be a tree, one realizes, would be an efficient way of serving one of one's ends, does not mean that one *should* pretend to be a tree, though, for there might be some even more efficient way of serving that end. Moreover, it might be that in serving that one end, or in serving it by pretending to be a tree, one would compromise one's ability to serve some other end one wants very much to realize. (One might avoid detection by pretending to be a tree, but thereby also forestall one's escaping to warn one's playmates.) Practical rationality consists not only in finding efficient means to one's ends, but also in weighing different efficient means against each other. And it consists in finding those means that satisfy the most, or the most important, of one's fund of ends, or at least in finding those that least seriously jeopardize other of one's important ends.

Many of us, certainly, have ends that we can efficiently serve by treating others as ends in themselves and not merely as means to our ends. Many of us have practical reasons of the sort described above for manifesting respect for others in our actions. We want to be kind to others, we enjoy that others are happy and well, we like to think we are the sort of people who do well by others. Manifesting respect for others encourages others to manifest respect for us, and it is both easier and more enjoyable to live and work in an atmosphere of respect than in one of treachery or indifference. We manifest respect for others out of sympathy for them and out of fellow feeling; it would not serve our self-image or emotional makeup to be hostile or uncaring toward others.

These reasons we have for treating others well, we frequently find, outweigh our reasons for treating others badly. And so, in the end, often we should take the time and effort, and accept the setbacks, required to manifest respect for others in our actions.

But to have a strong practical reason to conform to the imperative of respect is not necessarily to be bound categorically to conform to it. The sort of practical reason we have been discussing is the sort that makes essential appeal to contingent features of the psychology of the agent to whom the imperative is addressed. These practical reasons cite the desires or goals the agent happens to have, desire or goals that include her interests in achieving or maintaining a desired affective or emotional state and in living up to her self-conception or ideals. For an imperative to bind categorically, the agent must have a reason to conform to that imperative, whatever are the desires or goals or ideals that that agent happens to have, and however he is constituted emotionally. The agent must have a reason to conform to it whether, seen from the point of view of her contingent psychology, she wants to conform to it or not.

Now it would not be enough for an imperative to bind us categorically that all of us did actually have a reason, even the same reason, to conform to that imperative. Suppose it true that each of us has a particular reason of sympathy to treat others with respect. The imperative "treat each other respectfully," an imperative we all would then obey, would still not, though, merely in virtue of that reason of sympathy, be an imperative that binds categorically. There is no contradiction involved in imagining an agent who, unlike us, does not find himself in sympathy with others, and, thus, who does not have our reason to treat others with respect. Therefore, if we are bound categorically to treat each other with respect, it is not in virtue of the sympathetic attitudes we contingently happen to share.

What would make an imperative bind categorically, then, is that the reason the agent has to conform to it stems not from his appetites or projects or emotions, but merely from the fact that he is an agent—a creature, that is, who has appetites, projects, and emotions, and who possesses the power to reason about the world and about himself. The reason to follow the imperative would be for him a reason either because it motives him independently of his desires and ends (perhaps by necessarily giving rise to some particular desire or end that then figures in an ordinary practical reason) or because he possesses some desire or end or other motivational state without which he would not be an agent at all. Some philosophers who think that the imperative of respect does bind categorically argue, in accordance with the first option, that an agent who acquires the true belief that respecting others is good in itself will then form the motivation to do good and, thus, to treat others with respect. Other philosophers argue, in accordance with the second option, that to fail to conform to the imperative is to mire oneself in a practical inconsistency, and necessarily one cannot have a practical reason to do that. The argument we will consider below takes the second option.

In any case, if the imperative of respect binds agents categorically, then any agent who neglects adequately to consider whether he is treating another agent as an mere means is, by that agent's own standards, making a mistake or behaving irrationally, whatever that agent's wants, desires, emotions, plans, or projects happen to be, and whatever success in fulfilling his projects his neglecting to respect others happens to afford him.

3. An argument that the imperative of respect binds categorically

One argument meant to show that we are bound categorically to treat others as ends, an argument recently revived and defended by Christine Korsgaard, begins with the claim that each rational agent must acknowledge, through his attitudes and actions, that he himself, in virtue of his rational agency, is to be treated, by others and by himself, as an end in himself. Each rational agent also must know, according to this argument, that every other rational agent possesses just those features in virtue of which he acknowledges that he himself is to be treated as an end. (That I am a rational agent means, I acknowledge, that I am deserving of respect, and I know of you through our encounters that you, too, are a rational agent.) Thus, a rational agent will see, he himself and each other rational agent is to be treated as an end in himself. Now, given that an agent would be inconsistent in his actions were he to recognize rational agency as a reason to be treated with respect in his own case but not in the case of others who also possess it, these two claims taken together imply that an agent has a reason to treat all rational agents with respect. Notice that the agent has this reason independently of the attitudes and emotions that stand in back of his particular habits and projects as his reasons for them. Thus, according to this argument, all rational agents are bound categorically to treat each rational agent never merely as means to their own ends but always as an end in herself.

The key premise in this argument is that according to which each rational agent must, on reflection, understand that he himself is to be treated by others (and by himself) with respect. He must understand that he is to be treated with respect for he cannot fail to note that he is a rational agent, a creature able to formulate plans and projects, to act in the world on the basis of those plans and projects, and to reconsider and revise his plans and projects in light of evidence of their

failures and successes. Understanding both that he deserves respectful treatment and why he does, he cannot both be aware that another possesses the same ground of respectful treatment and yet fail to see he is bound to extend respectful treatment to that other. But how is it that reflection on his own rational agency must convey to him that he is deserving of respect?

The idea is not simply that he comes to see that he would like to be treated with respect. That he would like to be treated with respect might well bring him to see that others would like to be treated with respect as well, but that they would like to be treated in a particular way need not be for him a reason to treat them in that way. Rather, the idea must be that he comes to see that he is deserving of respect or entitled to it, that he is to be treated with respect, that others are duty-bound to treat him respectfully. How is this idea to be established?

The things of the world, considered just in themselves and apart from the projects of rational beings, are without value or meaning or importance. Value or meaning or importance comes to a thing only through its place in the projects of a rational being. Rational agency, then, is the ground of the value of the things of the world. His rational agency itself, though, as a ground of value, has a significance for the rational agent of a kind very different than that possessed by the things of the world. It is in virtue of being a rational agent that the agent has not value but dignity, worth of an ultimate kind. The agent's personal identity, that is to say, is not entirely a matter of that agent's values and projects and sympathies and patterns of emotional reaction, but also centrally contains his acknowledgement of his dignity as a rational agent. This fact is available to rational agents through reflection, and they acknowledge they understand it in certain characteristic moral emotions they feel. Primary among these moral emotions is the feeling of resentment. To fail to be treated as an end in himself, a rational agent sees, is to be ill-treated

in a way that offends his dignity, and this stirs resentment toward the offender. The feeling of resentment is not a feeling of disappointment at losing or failing to attain something one would like. It is, instead, a feeling based on the belief that one has been denied something to which one is entitled, to which one is entitled in virtue of one's dignity as a rational being. Thus, through reflection on the experience of resentment and his possession of dignity, the agent must note that he himself deserves to be treated with respect. —And that is how, those who endorse this argument say, the first premise of the argument that the imperative to treat rational agents with respect binds rational agents categorically is established.

Let us summarize the argument as a whole. Rational agents possess dignity, a significance independent of and prior to the value that comes to things through their place in the projects agents pursue. Their practical identity in the world has at its core their sense of dignity. A rational agent will come to see that he possesses dignity by reflecting on his rational agency and especially on his experiences of resentment at ill-treatment. Coming to see that he possesses dignity, he will understand that respectful treatment is not simply something that, on the basis of his projects or emotional constitution, he desires or appreciates, but something to which he is entitled. Other agents, then, he cannot fail to realize, are also entitled to respectful treatment, for they also possess just that which entitles him to respectful treatment. And therefore he has a reason independent of his practical projects, one stemming from the core of his practical identity, to treat himself and other rational agents with respect. To fail to extend respectful treatment to creatures he believes are entitled to such treatment is to march out of step with his own standards of rational action, standards that stem from his own deepest conception of himself. The binding force of the imperative to respect rational agents, this argument shows, does not stem from any of an agent's

own particular projects but instead from the core of his practical identity; and that's what it is for that imperative to bind rational agents categorically.

4. The distinction between binding categorically and binding absolutely

I note that this argument, if it succeeds, establishes at most that agents are irrational in failing to consider whether in pursuing their projects they will be treating others ill, or in failing to give the consideration that they would be treating another badly adequate weight in their deliberations. It does not establish that agents are irrational when they pursue their projects at the expense of treating others badly. That an action would manifest disrespect for another is, on this argument, always a reason for not performing it, and always a weighty reason for not performing it, but it isn't a reason that must override the reasons the agent has in favour of performing that action. But to note this result is merely to distinguish between imperatives that bind categorically and those that also bind absolutely, and to insist that an argument that an imperative binds categorically is not in itself an argument that it binds absolutely. Probably only an imperative that binds categorically could be an imperative that binds absolutely, though perhaps there is no imperative at all that binds absolutely.

5. Criticism of the argument that the imperative of respect binds categorically

An imperative binds an agent categorically, remember, only when the practical reason that that agent has to conform to that imperative makes no reference to that agent's personality or projects. Such a reason can, then, make reference only to the fact that the agent is an agent, a rational agent, a being possessed of personality, self-consciousness and rationality—a being who formulates

and executes plans and projects. And yet this reason must *motivate* the agent to conform to that imperative; this reason must make a difference to the agent's reasoning about what to do and, thereby, potentially to his behaviour. I don't think the argument presented in Section 3 above succeeds in showing that rational agents do have a motivating practical reason for treating persons with respect that makes no reference to their particular attitudes and projects. In the end, we who are concerned to treat others with respect simply like or enjoy or have as a project treating others with respect. Our practical reason for treating others respectfully is an ordinary practical reason like all the other practical reasons.

The target of my criticism is the claim that beings possessing dignity are entitled to respectful treatment. This claim serves as the ground for the claim that to be aware that one possesses dignity is to know that one is entitled to respectful treatment, and thus is to realize that anyone possessing dignity is also entitled to respectful treatment. It's not precisely that I think that this claim is false. Rather, I think that it can at most express an agent's commitment to treat others with respect, a commitment that itself either stems from an attitude of sympathy toward others or from an already assumed project to live ethically. Because it is an expression of a commitment motivated by contingent facts of personality, it cannot serve the idea that the imperative of respect binds agents categorically.

Let us grant that my appreciation of my significance to myself is unlike my appreciation of the significance to myself of the things in the world that I encounter. I matter to myself in a way wholly different from the way in which things in the world matter to me. Individual things in the world are more or less valuable to me, depending on their places in my projects and on my conative attitudes toward them, while my value to myself resides nowhere on that scale, not even

as its highest limit, and in fact seems to reside on no scale at all. So let us say that instead of being valuable (to myself), I possess dignity. We need to be careful here, though, not to suppose that dignity is a property that inheres in me, for our reflections allow it, like value, only to emerge from a relation, specifically, the relation I have to myself. Oddity of expression aside, just as individual things are valuable or not (to me), so also I possess dignity (to me).

That I possess dignity (in my own eyes) explains very well my emotional reactions to being ignored by others or treated merely as a means to their own ends. I bristle at rude or thoughtless or manipulative treatment because I possess dignity and being treated disrespectfully offends my dignity. But am I right or justified to react with these emotions? The question makes little sense for these reactions are so primitive and inevitable. I have no choice in the matter. Of course, I wish that I were not treated badly, I would like not to be treated badly, and I am justified in wishing not to be treated badly and preferring to be treated well. I am justified in wishing and preferring as I do on the grounds of my primitive and inevitable emotions. I might well express this justification of what I want and prefer by saying that by virtue of my rational agency I am entitled to respectful treatment, but saying this can mean only that I have good reason stemming from my affective constitution for wanting and preferring to be treated respectfully.

Anyone similarly constituted as I am such that they see they possess dignity (for themselves) will also bristle at disrespectful treatment. Since it is merely in virtue of being a rational agent that I can see that I possess dignity (for myself), that means that all other rational agents (human and nonhuman, if any there be) will also bristle at what they perceive to be disrespectful treatment. Each rational agent, then, has good reason to want and prefer to be treated well by others. Does the fact that we each have good reason to want to be treated well by

others imply that we are each categorically bound to treat others well? No, it doesn't, for each of us needs first a reason to care about the wants and preferences of others. There are, of course, plenty of reasons we each could have to care about others, some of which clearly count as reasons from ethics, others of which are obviously reasons of narrow self-interest, and many of which are neither clearly one or the other or bits of both. That I, for instance, understand what it feels like to be treated disrespectfully, and dislike that feeling intensely, can, given just a little bit of empathy, make me aware that you also dislike being treated disrespectfully. That you dislike being treated disrespectfully can, through sympathy and fellow-feeling, lead me to commit myself to try not to treat you other than with respect. I am not, though, bound to treat you with respect apart from the commitment I have assumed to treat you with respect, a commitment I have assumed because it pleases me to assume it.

The core of the argument that rational agents are categorically bound to treat each other with respect is this: I am entitled to respectful treatment at the hands of others in virtue of the dignity I possess as a rational agent; therefore, other rational agents, as beings possessing dignity, are entitled to respectful treatment at my hands. The issue with this argument is not so much whether the premise is false as it is rather what the premise means, or at least what it could mean given the argument meant to establish it. I have argued that it could mean simply that given my emotional constitution as a rational agent, I want and prefer to be treated respectfully. It appears to mean something other only because the idea that we possess dignity (to ourselves) rather than value (to ourselves) gets separated from the fact that it is our affective nature that makes disrespectful treatment unpleasant. When we understand the premise correctly, then, we see that it does not imply that the imperative to treat others with respect binds agents categorically.

6. Revising the argument: a vindication of the rationality of committing oneself to treat others respectfully

The imperative of respect does not bind agents categorically. That is not, of course, to say that we must lack a compelling practical reason to commit ourselves to treating others with respect. Indeed, I think, properly interpreted, the argument of Section 3 above can show us that many of us, if not most of us, do already have a compelling practical reason to treat others well. This reason we have supplies us with a standard by which to evaluate our own behaviour. Probably, we would find, according to that standard our behaviour is sadly lacking.

On my interpretation of that argument, we find not a justification of treating others with respect, if the point of such a justification would to show that it is inevitably irrational or self-defeating not to be committed to treating others with respect. A justification would have to proceed by reference to standards already in place, while what is precisely at issue in the argument are the standards to put in place themselves. Instead of a justification, then, we find in that argument a vindication of the commitment we have made to treating others with respect.

I would ask you to take my cares, concerns and feelings into account so far as the actions you are contemplating would affect me. I would ask you not to perform those actions that would manifest disrespect for me, or not to perform them in a manner that would manifest disrespect for me. I ask these things of you because I would prefer not to experience the emotional pain and feelings of resentment that I'm caused to experience when I am treated disrespectfully. Now I understand that my susceptibility to these emotions is deeply rooted, that, in fact, it is rooted in my rational agency itself, and not in any of the attitudes or projects that distinguish me from other rational agents. Thus, I understand that you, too, would ask these things of me for the reasons I

ask them of you. Now it happens, as a matter of psychological fact about me, that I feel empathy with others. I am emotionally pained by the thought of your being emotionally pained. Well, then, I have an excellent motivation not to treat you disrespectfully. In looking out to treat you well, I save myself emotional discomfort (and perhaps even promote my positive emotional well-being). In holding myself, then, as I do, to a high standard of respectful treatment of others, I am not acting unreasonably or generally against my own interests. I have, it seems, vindicated my commitment to the imperative of respect.

7. Ethical principles and reason

Korsgaard says that her inquiry into what she calls the sources of normativity is motivated in part by the fear that our ethical commitments will not survive rational scrutiny. Her concern is that should we find our ethical commitments to be on all fours with our other commitments and projects, we would lose interest in them. After all, to live up to our ethical commitments is difficult and often requires us to sacrifice projects to which we are attracted, or at least to forswear using what we recognize to be efficient ways of realizing them. Our ethical commitments would be on all fours with our other commitments should they turn out to rest on the same garden-variety practical reasons our habits and projects rest on, the sorts of practical reasons that involve desires and fears and likes and dislikes. And so Korsgaard hopes to find a ground for our ethical commitments outside of our hearts' desires, one that supports the idea that we are bound categorically to have commitments to ethics, and especially to the imperative of respect.

It's at least curious that Korsgaard speaks of a fear and a hope in regard to her inquiry, for in doing so she relates a concern to justify one's taking ethical standards seriously to a concern to

realize one's heart's desire. In any case, Korsgaard's fear and hope is widely shared. But why shouldn't it be enough to soothe our fears to discover that our ethical commitments are deeply rooted in our hearts' desires, though only in our hearts' desires? —Well, that's a topic for another time. Right now we have at least uncovered a solid though ordinary practical reason that people like us have for committing ourselves to extending respectful treatment to others. People like us commit ourselves to treating others with respect because it pleases us to do so. This need not, of course, be a practical reason that people unlike us, those who lack empathy or fellow-feeling, will have. Yet, if an ordinary practical reason is all that could be available to us to vindicate as rational our commitment to an ethical principle, then finding that we do in fact have such a practical reason is really just what we need in order to sustain that commitment.

Endnote

[*]The argument I give in this section is my synopsis of the argument developed in Christine Korsgaard's chapters of *The Sources of Normativity*. Some of the ideas in this argument are also found in the essay "Kant's Formula of Humanity," from Korsgaard's collection *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. See: Christine M. Korsgaard, et al., *The Sources of Normativity*, Onora O'Neill, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Christine M. Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).