The Formula of the End in Itself

We can draw a broad distinction between things that are good as means, and things that are good as ends. The distinction emerges clearly enough if we select some good thing and ask why it is good. Take money as something good as a means; take happiness (?) as something that might be good as an end.

We can define ‘means” in terms of ‘end in itself’:

D1: x is an end in itself =df. x has value in itself; x would continue to have this value even if x did not lead to anything else.

D2: x is a means =df. x has value in virtue of what it leads to; x would lose this value if x did not lead to other valuable things.

Contrasting with intrinsic value is instrumental value. Some things possess a kind of value that they would not continue to have if they didn’t (i) lead to the existence of further bearers of positive value, or (ii) prevent things of negative value from obtaining, or (iii) deprive the world of things of positive value from obtaining. If completely cut off from their causal chains, bearers of instrumental value would no longer be instrumentally valuable.

Thus, according to D2, money is a means, since the possession of money might help you to get happiness. But happiness is an end (?) since it would still be just as good even if it did not lead to anything else.

Philosophers have disagreed about what in fact is an end in itself. Mill and others have said that pleasure is the only thing that is an end in itself. G. E. Moore claimed that the love of beauty is an end in itself. Others have said that knowledge, virtue, and pleasure are all ends in themselves.

Kant claims that ‘rational nature exists as an end in itself.”(p. 55) By this, he seems to mean that all rational beings, including people, are ends in themselves. In other words, every person is intrinsically good. From this, Kant infers that it can never be morally right to treat any person merely as a means. That is, it is never morally right to treat a person as if he were simply a useful object for your own purposes. This view, which is the second version of the categorical imperative, is stated by Kant in a variety of ways:

Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.2

[elsewhere he states it differently, but these are not in our anthology:

A rational being, by his very nature an end and consequently an end in himself, must serve for every maxim as a condition limiting all merely relative and arbitrary ends.3
So act in relation to every rational being (both to yourself and to others) that he may at the same time count in your maxim as an end in himself.4]

Let us understand Kant to be saying in these passages that one ought never to act in such a way as to treat anyone merely as a means. In other words:

CI2: An act is morally right if and only if the agent, in performing it, refrains from treating any person as a mere means.

According to CI2, there is a moral prohibition against treating anyone merely as a means. We should recognize that CI2 does not rule out treating a person as a means. That is, CI2 must not be confused with this rather implausible view:

CI2': An act is morally right if and only if, in performing it, the agent refrains from treating any person as a means.

CI2'' rules out any act in which the agent treats anyone as a means. But this is absurd, since we use other people as means to our ends all the time, and we cannot avoid doing so. A student uses his teacher as a means to gaining an education; a teacher uses her students as a means to gaining a livelihood; a customer in a restaurant uses his waiter as a means to gaining his dinner. None of these acts is ruled out by CI2. For in each of these cases the agent of the act may also treat the others involved, at least in part, as ends in themselves. Thus, although these acts would violate a preposterous principle such as CI2', it is not clear that they would have to violate the more plausible principle, CI2. For as we are understanding it, this second version of the categorical imperative only rules out treating persons merely as means.

I suspect that many of you are thinking of the Bob Seger song, “Night Moves”. In that song, Bob reminisces about his first girlfriend – the girlfriend with whom he first explored the mysteries of sex. He sings like this

We weren't in love, oh no, far from it
We weren't searchin' for some pie in the sky summit
We were just young and restless and bored
Livin' by the sword
And we'd steal away every chance we could
To the backroom, to the alley or the trusty woods
I used her, she used me
But neither one cared
We were gettin' our share
Workin' on our night moves
Tryin' to lose the awkward teenage blues
Workin' on our night moves
And it was summertime

CI2 embodies an important moral insight, one that many would find plausible. It is the idea that it is wrong to ‘use" people. People are not mere objects, to be manipulated to
serve our purpose. We cannot treat people as we treat wrecked cars, or wilted flowers, or old tin cans. Such things can be thrown out or destroyed when we no longer have any use for them. People, on the other hand, have dignity and worth, and must be treated accordingly.

Thus, what CI2 says seems fairly plausible. Nevertheless, many moral philosophers would be uneasy about the claim that CI2 is a formulation of ‘the supreme principle of morality.’ Can it really be the case that all wrong action is action in which people are used merely as means? Can all of our moral obligations be seen as obligations to treat people as ends? Some philosophers, admitting that it is important to treat people with respect, will deny that CI2 captures the whole of our moral obligation. Others may even have their doubts about the acceptability of the insight embodied in CI2, even if that insight were interpreted rather generously. Thus, it would be useful to see why Kant thinks CI2 is true.

An Argument for CI2

Kant suggests what seems to be a fairly interesting argument for CI2. First, he points out that if there is something that is good as an end in itself, then that thing will provide a ‘ground of a possible categorical imperative.’(p. 55) By this, Kant seems to mean that if there is something that is good as an end in itself, then there is a true moral principle to the effect that this thing, whatever it may be, ought to be treated as if it were good as an end in itself. This seems reasonable.

Then Kant tries to show that people are ends in themselves. If he can succeed in establishing this point, then he will have a simple argument to show that people ought to be treated as ends in themselves. From this, it is not a very great step to the conclusion that an act is morally right if and only if the agent, in performing it, refrains from treating any person merely as a means.

Kant’s argument that people exist as ends in themselves is rather complex, but the main thrust of it appears in the following passage:

Persons ... are not merely subjective ends whose existence as an object of our actions has a value for us: they are objective ends--that is, things whose existence is in itself an end, and indeed an end such that in its place we can put no other end to which they should serve simply as means; for unless this is so, nothing at all of absolute value would be found anywhere. But if all value were conditioned--that is, contingent--then no supreme principle could be found for reason at all. (p. 55)

We can simplify what appears to be Kant’s argument as follows:

People-are-Ends Argument

(1) If people are not ends in themselves, then nothing is an end in itself.
(2) If nothing is an end in itself, then there is never any reason to act in one way rather than in any other.
(3) There is sometimes a reason to act in one way rather than in another.
(4) Therefore, people are ends in themselves.
In this form, the argument is valid. Furthermore, at least two of the premises seem quite plausible. The second premise asserts that if nothing is an end, then no act is preferable to any other. This may seem odd, but it makes sense. To see why, consider, if you can, a state of affairs in which nothing is an end in itself. If there is nothing that is an end in itself, then there is nothing that is a means. For according to D1, to say that something, x, is a means is just to say that there is some end in itself, y, such that x contributes to the existence of y. With no end, there can be no means. Thus, if there is nothing good as an end in itself, then there is nothing good either as an end or as a means. Hence, in these circumstances there would be nothing good at all. But if nothing is good at all, there can be no good reason to prefer any action to any other action. In this way, we can see that if there is nothing good as an end, then there is no reason to act in one way rather than in any other. This establishes (2).

Premise (3) is pretty straightforward. If we grant that some alternatives are morally preferable to others, then we must grant (3). The only person who would deny (3) is one who rejects morality altogether. Surely, the views of such a person may be ignored here.

Thus, the whole argument seems to turn on premise (1). It is clear that Kant affirms (1). He explicitly says that people are ‘objective ends,” and he goes on to say that ‘unless this is so, nothing at all of absolute value will be found anywhere.” Yet it is not easy to see why Kant maintains this view. Isn't it possible that people are not ends in themselves, but that pleasure, for example, is? Some moralists would deny that people are ends in themselves, but would maintain that beautiful objects are ends in themselves. Others would say that people are good only as means, since the things that are good as ends are one and all mental states that exist only if there are people. In order to establish (1), Kant has to show that all such views are mistaken. He has to show that if people are not intrinsically good, then nothing is. Without some persuasive argument, it is not easy to accept this premise.

So Kant's argument is rather weak. He hasn't shown that people are ends in themselves. Nevertheless, many people would agree with Kant on this point. They would say that whether it can be proved or not, people are in fact ends in themselves. If this view is correct, it would of course be reasonable to maintain that people ought to be treated with the respect and consideration due to things of such great value.

Problems for CI2

The greatest problem for CI2 is not, however, the lack of a convincing proof. Nor is it that CI2 is subject to obvious counter-examples. Rather, the main difficulty with CI2 is that its meaning is never made sufficiently clear. The most troublesome concept in this version of the categorical imperative is the concept of “treating someone as a mere means.” It is pretty clear that if you own and mistreat slaves, then you treat them as means. But what about some more typical cases? What about a patron in a diner who grunts out his order to the waitress without even looking at her? What about a “freeloader” who lives with relatives? What about a factory owner who pays minimum wages and refuses to install safety equipment? Are these people treating others merely as means? Suppose the patron smiles and leaves a tip. Suppose the freeloader offers to do some work around the house. Suppose the factory owner gives a bonus at Christmas. Would they still be treating others merely as means? Would they be treating them, in part, as ends in themselves? It is very hard to tell.
When a concept is left unclear, one way to gain some clarification is by looking closely at the author's examples. Often, the examples will shed light on the more important general concept. Fortunately, Kant has given several examples of the application of CI2. Close consideration of these may help to clarify the intent of the principle. The examples are the same ones Kant discussed in connection with CI1. (Unfortunately, they do not appear in your anthology.)

The first example is the man who contemplates committing suicide. As we saw previously, Kant's view is that suicide in this particular case would be wrong. Hence, he tries to show that the contemplated act would violate CI2:

If he does away with himself in order to escape from a painful situation, he is making use of a person merely as a means to maintain a tolerable state of affairs till the end of his life. But man is not a thing—not something to be used merely as a means: he must always in all his actions be regarded as an end in himself. Hence I cannot dispose of man in my person by maiming, spoiling, or killing. (not in anthology; on p. 97 in Paton edition)

Kant's point here seems to be that if the man were to commit suicide, then he would be using himself merely as a means to the end of making his life tolerable until its end. If this is Kant's point, it certainly seems quite strained. Surely, the man could claim that in order to treat himself as an end, he must commit suicide. For if he does not commit suicide, he will suffer. And, he could insist, it is not appropriate for a person who is an end in himself to suffer.

So Kant's comments on this example are not very helpful. He does not say anything that gives us a new insight into the concept of treating someone merely as a means. Hence, we turn to the second example.

Kant's comments on the second example are more revealing. This is the case of the lying promise. Kant suggests that the man who makes the lying promise is 'intending to make use of another man merely as a means to an end he does not share.' (not in anthology; p. 97 in Paton) Kant goes on to point out that the other man 'cannot possibly agree with my way of behaving to him.' Kant's point here seems to be this: The man to whom the lie is told does not want to be used in the way the liar uses him. If he knew what was going on, he would refuse to lend the money. Thus, the liar is using him merely as a means. For this reason, his act is in violation of CI2, and so is wrong.

Understood in this way, Kant's comments suggest a definition of what is meant by saying that a person, A, treats a person, B, merely as a means:

*D3: A treats B as a mere means =df. A treats B in such a way that if B knew all about it, B would not want A to treat him in that way.

Thus, if I treat you in a certain way, and you do not agree to being treated in that way, then I use you merely as a means. I use you for my purposes, but not for your own. Hence, according to CI2, I act wrongly.
This line of reasoning may be plausible, but it leads to unacceptable results in a wide variety of cases. A large group of these cases have a similar pattern: B wants to do something morally wrong. A prevents B from doing this wrong act. According to D2, A is then using B merely as a means, since B would not agree to A treating him in that way. According to CI2, then, A is acting wrongly. This seems absurd.

Let us consider an example. Suppose Abe the Abuser wants to beat up his kids. Mrs. Abuser locks the door, and tells Abe to come back when he’s sober. This annoys Abe, since it prevents him from beating up his kids, which he wants to do. Amazingly, D2 implies that Mrs. Abe is treating Abe as a mere means, since she is treating him in a way in which he does not want to be treated. CI2 then implies that she (not he) is doing the wrong thing.

As long as we interpret ‘treating a person merely as a means” according to D2, it will not be clear how this problem can be avoided. For it implies that whenever you interfere with another person’s goals, you treat him as a mere means. This would be the case even if the other person’s goals were completely immoral. It appears, then, that we should not accept this account of the crucial concept. It does not provide us with a plausible view about what Kant might have meant when he talked about treating people as mere means. Let us consider the next example to see if we can find a more helpful suggestion.

The third example is the case of the person who decides to let all his talents rust. Kant thinks this is morally wrong, and so he tries to show that to so act would be to violate CI2. Kant’s comments on this case appear to be somewhat misdirected, however. Instead of trying to show that the man who lets his talents rust thereby treats himself merely as a means, Kant claims that he fails to ‘harmonize with'' and ‘promote'' humanity as an end in itself (whatever that may mean). The relevance of these comments is not clear. For CI2 does not require us to 'harmonize with'' or 'promote'' humanity as an end in itself. It requires us only to refrain from treating people merely as means.

Since the third example is rather questionable anyway, let us move on and try to find some illumination in the final example. This is the example of the man who refuses to give to charity. Kant’s comments here are more helpful. He apparently holds that the man who refuses to give to charity thereby acts wrongly. His error is that he fails to ‘agree positively with humanity as an end in itself.’ (again, not in anthology, but on p. 98 in Paton.) If the man were to have done this, Kant suggests, he would have had to try, as much as he could have, to ‘further the ends of others.' Kant claims that since other people are ends in themselves, we act rightly only if we make their ends our own. This is an interesting idea, so let us examine it more closely.

Kant’s comments on the final example suggest another interpretation of what is meant by ‘A treats B merely as a means." Kant explicitly says that we must further the ends of others. By this he seems to mean that unless we try, as much as we can, to see to it that others achieve their goals, we are not treating them as ends in themselves. We are treating them merely as means. Thus, if another person is trying to be happy, we must not only refrain from making him unhappy, we must try to help him become happy. The man who gives nothing to charity obviously violates this requirement. He treats those who need aid merely as means. We can define this concept as follows:
*D4: A treats B as a mere means =df. B has some goal, and A could help B achieve that goal, but A refrains from doing so.

When we combine CI2 with D4, we seem to get the correct result in the charity case. Those who need charity have a certain goal—happiness. The agent can help them to achieve that goal, but he decides to refrain from doing so. Hence, according to D4, he treats them merely as means. But CI2 says that one acts rightly only if he treats no one merely as a means. So, in this case CI2 entails that the man who refuses to give charity does not act rightly. His selfish act is morally wrong. This result seems acceptable.

However, the problem with D4 should be obvious. It is, in effect, the same as the problem with D3. If Abe wants to get into his house so he can beat up his kids, and the neighbor has a spare key, then the neighbor has a moral obligation to “positively further Abe’s ends”. We have to help him get into the house. This seems preposterous.

So the trouble with D4 is that, together with CI2, it requires us to help others to achieve their goals, whatever those goals may be. If the others have morally acceptable goals, this may seem to be a reasonable doctrine. But if the goals of the others are morally wrong, then it is absurd to insist that we should try to help them to achieve these goals. Yet this is just what D4 and CI2 require.

Before we leave CI2, we may find it worthwhile to consider one final proposal. Kant does not make this proposal himself, but some sympathetic readers may find hints of it in the *Groundwork*. The basic idea is that there are some goals that it is rational for a person to have, and others that it is irrational for a person to have. For example, it might be said that it is rational for a person to have happiness as his goal, whereas it is irrational of him to have beating up his kids as his goal. Perhaps Kant would say that we are under no moral obligation to help others achieve irrational goals, but if another person is attempting to achieve a rational goal, then we should 'make his end our own.'

One way to develop this idea would be as follows. First, we must introduce a new definition:

*D5: A treats B as a mere means =df. B has some *rational* goal, and A can help B achieve that goal, but A refrains from doing so.

The difference between D4 and D5 is small, but significant. According to D4, we treat another person merely as a means if we fail to help him achieve his goal, whatever that goal may be. According to D5, we treat him merely as a means if we fail to help him achieve a rational, or reasonable, goal. Thus, the concept defined in D4 may be more promising.

When we combine D5 with CI2, we get what may seem to be a more plausible moral doctrine. For under this interpretation, CI2 requires us to help others to achieve their rational goals only when those goals are rational. So there would be no need to help another person to beat up his children, or molest women on campus, or commit a crime. On the other hand, there would be a need to help another to become happy—assuming that it is rational for that person to want to become happy.
Although the use of D5 helps to make this version of the categorical imperative somewhat more successful, very great problems remain. For one, it often happens that there are several different persons who might benefit from one person's action. For example, suppose a man has an unbreakable piece of candy that he can give to either of two twins, Jean and Joan. If he gives the candy to Jean, he will make her happy. This will help Jean to achieve a rational goal she has. However, if he gives the candy to Jean, he will not be helping Joan to achieve a rational goal she has, for he will fail to help her to become happy. Similarly, if he gives it to Joan, he will fail to help Jean achieve a rational goal. Thus, according to D5, whichever twin the man helps, he treats the other merely as a means. CI2, then, implies that his act of giving the candy is morally wrong.

The general point should be clear. I can help each of many different persons achieve his rational goals. However, I cannot simultaneously help all of these individuals achieve their rational goals. I must choose some to help and some to ignore. According to D5, it would follow that I have to treat some of them merely as means. CI2 then yields the inevitable result that I act wrongly. This seems much too severe.

The second main problem with D5 is that it makes use of a rather obscure concept -- the concept of a 'rational goal.' If you think about it for a minute, you will see that where ultimate goals are concerned, it is hard to distinguish the rational from the irrational. Normally, we would say that a person who aims to collect a large amount of money is pursuing a rational goal whereas a person who aims to collect a large number of bent nails is pursuing an irrational goal. But what is the difference? If each can gain happiness from his collection, why is one more rational than the other? Perhaps the only rational goal is happiness itself.

It is interesting to note that if we assume that happiness is the only rational goal, and if we also assume that Kant's view is the more moderate view that we should do the most we can to help other people achieve their rational goals, then Kant's view becomes indistinguishable from act utilitarianism. Of course, there is nothing in Kant's writing to suggest that he ever made either of these assumptions. With these reflections, we have strayed quite far from Kant's text. Perhaps it would be better to avoid such speculations.

It appears, then, that CI2 is not a very successful principle. The insight behind it is vague, although plausible. There surely is something morally objectionable about using people. However, Kant's discussion of this view does not do enough to clarify this vague insight. Whether we interpret 'A treats B merely as a means' according to D3, D4, or D5, CI2 yields obviously incorrect results in many cases. Until some more plausible account of the meaning of CI2 we have to conclude that it is not clear that it is the "supreme principle of morality"

Good luck on the quiz!