

The Formulation of Humanity

by John Lumsden



WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will see what a maxim is, and see how to evaluate it using a test derived from one of Kant's formulations of the categorical imperative. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Evaluation of Maxims
2. The Formulation of Humanity
3. The Absolute Value of Humanity
4. The Formulation of Humanity in Practice

1. Evaluation of Maxims

To begin with, recall that Kantian deontology is a form of deontology that places absolute moral value in the agent's intent. It doesn't matter whether or not you succeed in bringing about what you intended.

Kant argued that an intention isn't just any decision you make to do something. For Kant, intentions only move you to act in a certain way if they can be expressed as a kind of direction or command you give to yourself. Consider these examples.

"I will **buy food** when **I'm near shops** in order to **satisfy my hunger**"

"I will **hunt or gather food** when **I'm in the wild** in order to **satisfy my hunger**"

In both cases your purpose is to satisfy hunger, but your means to do so is different. Your means change depending on the situation. Kant calls these commands **maxims**. They usually come in this form:

"I will **do something** under **such-and-such circumstances** for **some purpose**"

If you carry out a maxim, then you've realized it in an act. Since Kant doesn't think morality depends on whether or not you achieve your purpose, he doesn't evaluate the action. Instead, it's the **maxim** that's to be evaluated.

To evaluate a maxim you need to see how it fits with the categorical imperative. If it violates the categorical imperative it's impermissible (i.e. it's wrong to do); if it doesn't then it's permissible (i.e. it isn't wrong to do).



TERM TO KNOW

Maxim

2. The Formulation of Humanity

The idea of a categorical imperative is quite difficult to grasp. It's fairly easy to think about a law or rule that applies to specific people.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You know that a driver should follow the rules of the road, or that a doctor should obey the command to help the sick (they should uphold the Hippocratic Oath).

But what does a demand or imperative look like when it's not relative to the person following it? In other words, what are the rules or laws that everyone should be following?

Kant was aware of this difficulty, so he gave different formulations of the categorical imperative to make it easier to understand. One of the formulations is called the formulation of humanity. In short, it says you should always respect people's humanity (including your own) when you make use of people for some purpose.



By humanity Kant means those features that make us ethical agents; for instance, that we can use our rational capacities to determine goals and that we have the freedom necessary to pursue these goals.

In order to get a better idea of what this means, let's look at an example of *not* respecting humanity.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine you have a friend called Habib, and you want to persuade him to not be friends with Olivia. You make up some reasons why Olivia wouldn't be a good friend (e.g. she's always running late).

If you succeed in making Habib not want to be friends with Olivia, then you would have abused his rationality by fooling him, so you can get him to do what you want.

In this example you would have deprived your friend of the opportunity to use his capacity to make a decision for himself. But if the reasons you gave were actually true, then you would be helping him to make an informed decision. You would still be using him as a means to your end (e.g. of making sure he doesn't become friends with Olivia), but you would be respecting his humanity at the same time.

3. The Absolute Value of Humanity

You might be wondering: is humanity really so important? Kant says it is because it's needed for the good will, which is more important than anything else. The good will (i.e. the will that intends what's right) is more valuable than, say, good talents or good fortune. That's because, no matter how good your talents are, they aren't *always* good.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You might intend to use your surgical talents to give people lifesaving treatments. But your intention might change: you might intend to use this skill to torture people instead.

Talent isn't inherently valuable because its value depends on something else (i.e. the purpose you use it for). Only the good will has inherent value because only it doesn't depend on something else for its goodness.

You couldn't have a good will if you didn't have humanity.



Could you intend to do what's right if you didn't have those capacities that make you human, such as rationality and freedom?

Since human capacities or humanity is needed for the good will, it's just as valuable as the good will. This is why Kant thinks you should respect humanity as well as the good will.



Having a good will and humanity are the only things that have value in themselves, because they don't depend on anything else to make them good.

4. The Formulation of Humanity in Practice

Now let's try to apply this formulation. First of all, you need to identify a maxim. Then you need to see if that maxim treats humanity merely as a means, or whether it treats humanity as an end as well.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Say your maxim is: "When I'm struggling with my study I will ask a friend to talk me through her notes."

Your intention here would be to use your friend to help you understand what you're studying. But since you do nothing to limit their rational or moral capacities, you also respect their humanity as an end. Therefore, it's permissible.

Now let's see what happens when we change this maxim.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Say your maxim is: "When I'm struggling with my study I will blackmail my friend for her notes."

In this case you don't allow your friend to make the decision to help you for themselves. Instead, you make them do it by threatening to do something bad to them. So you don't respect their humanity as an end in itself. Therefore, it's impermissible.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by seeing that Kantian deontologists perform an **evaluation of maxims** rather than actions or their consequences. It was explained that a maxim is the principle of action that you use in certain situations. The **formulation of humanity** was presented as a way to test whether a maxim is permissible or not.

Then we saw that **the absolute value of humanity** lies in the fact that it's needed for the good will, which is the only thing that has intrinsic value. Finally, we looked at **the formulation of humanity in practice** by applying it to two maxims, one of which was permissible, the other impermissible.



TERMS TO KNOW

Maxim

The situation-specific principle of an action that an agent upholds by acting in that way.