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Jochen Bojanowski

Kant on Human Dignity

A Response to Oliver Sensen

Abstract: In his book, “Kant on Human Dignity”, Oliver Sensen argues that the standard interpretation of Kant’s conception of human dignity as an absolute value property is mistaken. According to Sensen, the standard interpretation is based on the assumption that Kant endorses Moorean moral intuitionism. This leads to the false view that we must first perceive that other human beings have value and then infer that we ought to respect them. Against this standard interpretation Sensen claims that Kant endorses moral prescriptivism. According to this view a value statement is “nothing more than a (rational) prescription that commands what we should value”. If we interpret Kant’s moral epistemology along these lines, we will come to see that dignity is in fact a relational concept. In this paper I want to agree with Sensen that Kant was not a moral intuitionist. In thinking that objectivity in morality would require that the moral law “exists” independently of rational cognizers the moral intuitionist presupposes a conception of objectivity rather than arguing for it. The unargued presupposition is that the object has to be something other than the cognizing subject itself. However, the fact that intuitionism is not the adequate account does not imply that the standard interpretation of Kant’s conception of human dignity is mistaken. In other words, the claim ‘intuitionism is false’ and ‘human dignity is an absolute value property’ are compatible. I believe that Sensen ultimately does not sufficiently appreciate the fact that the moral law is the form of *practical cognition*. Prescriptivism only claims that a certain action is rational, but it does not explain why we perform it. Since the inner worth of a good action as well as the inner worth of humanity as such depends on practical cognition a priori, I don’t see any reason why we should resist the claim that Kant ascribes an absolute or inner metaphysical value property both to humanity and to particular morally good actions. My paper comes in three parts. I first want to show why Kant is neither a moral intuitionist nor a prescriptivist but that his view is best described as a view I call ‘moral idealism’. I then argue that moral constructivism does not have the voluntarist or subjectivist implications Sensen takes it to have, and that is much

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closer to the position he sympathizes with. Finally I show on textual grounds why Kant did in fact ascribe an absolute value to humanity and to morally good actions.

Keywords: Dignity, Intuitionism, Moral Realism, Constructivism.

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1 Kant's Moral Ontology

Let me begin by laying out the main ontological and epistemological presuppositions that are fundamental to the contemporary conception of dignity. According to Sensen, the contemporary notion implies “value realism such as one might find it in G. E. Moore [...]. Human beings possess the *objective and inherent value property* called dignity” (148, my emphasis). This value property endows human beings with objective moral value. Its reality does not depend on a particular context or on the fact that the value is perceived. Thus, it can be called a non-relational or absolute value property. According to Moore, since moral values are non-natural properties, they cannot be epistemically accessed through experience. Hence we need to assume a special faculty of intuition in order to explain how we come to know this peculiar kind of property.

In the first chapter of his book, Sensen convincingly argues that Kant did not adhere to the Moorean version of moral realism. Kant does not think that moral values are properties of objects given to us through a special form of intuition. However – and this brings me to my first question – are we entitled to infer from this, as Sensen does, that for Kant “value is not a distinct metaphysical property of a human being or thing” (35)? Is Kant really, as Sensen suggests, a prescriptivist who holds that the phrase “is good” only means “is prescribed by reason” (ibid.)? It is certainly true that for Kant moral value has its source in reason. But if Kant claims that reason is by itself practical and brings about the good action, isn't he thereby also committed to the claim that the metaphysical value is instantiated in that action? Why would it be wrong to say that the action itself has a metaphysical value property, if it can be considered the actualization of a morally good maxim that is grounded in practical cognition?

Prescriptivism only claims that a certain action is rational, but it does not explain why we perform it. Sensen is right in claiming that actions or maxims are not objects given to us that we then evaluate as good or evil through some peculiar kind of moral intuition. However, even though we cannot know whether a particular action or maxim is in fact morally good (or performed from duty), it

does not follow that it does not have this moral property. On the contrary, Kant's claim that in practical cognition reason can bring about morally good actions implies that the actions that result will then possess the metaphysical value of goodness. It would be wrong to say that the value is only a property projected onto some given action. Instead, the action only comes into existence through, or because of, our pure practical cognition. This does make the value property dependent on the cognizing subject, so that it does not, as Sensen puts it, "exist by itself like a substance" (27), but it does not make it any less metaphysical. So, in short, my question can be phrased as follows: If the good will can be called good without qualification, and willing is, in contrast to mere wishing, causally efficacious, aren't we also entitled to ascribe a value property to the action as the instance of our general volition? Again, Sensen's main claim that Kant does not "ground moral requirements on a prior or independent value" (31) is right, but this does not entail that Kant would deny the existence of metaphysical moral properties. Sensen's conclusion would only follow if we assumed that the following alternatives are exhaustive: Either moral values are objective and exist independently of the mind or they are subjective and dependent on the mind. If they exist independently of the mind, they are real and metaphysical properties. If they are dependent on the mind, they are subjective and psychological. I believe that if we refrain from buying too much into the fundamental assumptions of Moorean moral epistemology, we would be in a position to resist this false alternative.

For Sensen there appear to be four different options in moral ontology:

1. "Value could be a distinct metaphysical property."
2. "Value could be a relation between two objects, e.g. a relation of usefulness or fittingness."
3. "Value could be subjective, in the sense that it is what a subject does value (e.g. pleasure, happiness)."
4. "Value statements could be nothing more than a (rational) prescription that commands what one should value." (29)

As I have indicated above, Sensen claims that Kant endorses option (iv). However, if my argument is correct, then these options are not exhaustive. Each of them fails to appropriately capture Kant's view. Moral values for Kant can indeed exist as metaphysical properties of actions or dispositions, but they don't exist independently of rational beings; rather, their existence depends on the self-consciousness of pure practical cognition. In practical cognition our cognition brings the object into "existence" (see KpV, AA 05: 46; cf. KrV, B IX f.). The object of pure practical reason is the good (see KpV, AA 05: 57 f.). When we cognize that we cannot rationally will a certain end, we think of this end as devoid of value. So we do not first perceive a certain principle, disposition, or action as morally valu-

able, but rather determine whether a maxim can be universally willed without contradiction, thereby determining whether it agrees with the moral law. It would be contradictory for an agent to claim that something cannot be willed without contradiction and at the same time to maintain that it is good. The object of this maxim is not a possible object of pure practical cognition (volition). There is no knowledge of the good independently of the moral law or its effect on our volition. The object of our practical cognition (the good) is brought into existence through a kind of self-affection: in knowing practically, our cognition affects us through the feeling of respect for the moral law. And the good is realized in that action. My general cast of mind (my *Gesinnung*), as well as the particular action I perform, both have an inner metaphysical moral value.

Sensen might object that this is merely an epistemic point and shows nothing about the metaphysics of values. However, since the object of our cognition is the will, or the subject itself, there is no object that is ontologically prior to this cognition. Nor do we first presuppose some value property attaching to our rational nature as an end in itself and infer from there to the validity of the moral law. Instead, in willing a maxim, we become conscious of the requirements of practical cognition, which just are requirements of rational volition as such. So I cannot become conscious of these requirements without willing rationally. It is not as if we can infer the validity of the categorical imperative from our absolute value as rational agents; rather, we have absolute value because we have the capacity to act from our self-consciousness as practical cognizers (or from categorical imperatives). Thinking that objectivity in morality would require that the moral law “exists” independently of rational cognizers is presupposing a conception of objectivity rather than arguing for it. The unargued presupposition is that the object has to be something other than the cognizing subject itself.

2 Constructivism

In the second chapter, Sensen turns to Allen Wood’s, Christine Korsgaard’s, and Paul Guyer’s attempts to justify the value of human dignity. Their non-metaphysical reading is, according to Sensen, generally in line with his own position. All of them, Sensen claims, “do not conceive of value as a distinct metaphysical property, but rather as something one is committed to valuing, or something a perfectly rational being would value” (Summary ch. 2). However, he wants to show that none of their arguments successfully establishes that human dignity ought to be respected. Their arguments “fail to derive a moral conclusion (that one should respect others) from non-moral premises (e.g. from the ends human

beings set themselves in everyday life). The arguments mostly fail to establish that one really is committed to valuing other human beings” (Summary).

Since I am primarily interested in Sensen’s own account, I won’t be examining these arguments closely. But I do want to note that his overall argumentative strategy is not without difficulties. The stated goal of the book is not to defend Kant’s conception of human dignity, but to show on textual grounds that Kant’s conception of human dignity has been widely misrepresented. However, when he turns to the positions of contemporary Kantians, Sensen does try to expose the flaws in their arguments for the claim that we are committed to valuing other human beings. This naturally gives rise to the question whether Sensen’s Kant fares any better. The question becomes especially pressing in relation to Allen Wood, who does not simply ignore the universal law formula of the categorical imperative, but attempts to thoroughly evaluate and reject it. Wood believes that he has good philosophical reasons to begin with a more substantial notion of moral value than Kant does. So his book *Kantian Ethics* deliberately attempts to capture not the letter, but the spirit of Kant’s account. Wood attempts to understand Kant better than Kant has understood himself. I agree with Sensen that Allen Wood’s view is incorrect both on textual and systematic grounds. However, it is not sufficient to show that Wood’s account is not in line with Kant’s text. Nor is it sufficient to show that Wood’s justification fails to establish the moral value of human beings. The question that remains open is whether Sensen’s Kant can give a more satisfactory answer to the question why we owe respect to our fellow human beings. Answering this question requires addressing the criticisms that have been put forward (by Allen Wood, among others) against Kant’s theory of moral obligation.

In responding to this challenge, Sensen might discover that many more Kantians are in line with the kind of realism he wants to endorse. As Sensen sees it, there are three options: You can be (i) a realist about values, (ii) a realist about the moral law, or (iii) a constructivist (37). Sensen follows (ii) and wants to deny constructivism and value realism. He takes constructivism to be the view that the moral law “is merely constructed by human beings in a volitional act”. The realism he holds, by contrast, maintains that “the moral law is an in-built principle of [practical, sic] reason”. Now, already in *The Sources of Normativity*, Christine Korsgaard argues that there are rational constraints built into the procedure of rational volition or practical reason. These constraints are not external constraints but constitutive of the procedure itself. In other words, to will autonomously is to aim at universality. The procedure does not deem every maxim to be good. Instead, a maxim can only count as good “if action and [...] purpose are related to one another so that the maxim can be willed as a law”. In her reply to G. A. Cohen, Korsgaard puts forward this point very effectively: “[A]utonomous lawmaking

just isn't autonomous lawmaking unless it is done universally. The requirement of universalization [...] is constitutive of the activity itself [...]. If I am going to will at all I must do so universally" (SN 235). This shows that even in her earlier work, Korsgaard already advocates a view which has more recently been labeled "constitutivism" and which is precisely the view Sensen explicitly sympathizes with. The upshot of this is that Korsgaard's constructivism (which I think is a misnomer to begin with) is much closer to Sensen's view than he makes it seem. Constructivism need not be taken as a kind of anti-realism – both when it comes to the reality of values and in the case of the reality of the moral law.

3 Kant's Conception of Dignity

I now want to turn to the second part of the book, where Sensen develops his positive view, or what he calls the "traditional paradigm of human dignity". On the traditional account, "dignity" is used to express "a special position or elevation" (153). "Dignity is not in the first instance a moral or normative notion, but it expresses a relation, that one thing X is raised above another Y. What is raised above and why depends on the context in which the concept is used. [...] For instance, a Roman senator is raised above the rest of the citizens in virtue of his political power. Human beings are said to be raised above the rest of nature in virtue of possessing reason [and freedom]" (Summary Ch. 4, 153). In the traditional sense, then, "dignity" is taken to be a relational value. This "initial dignity" of being raised above the rest of nature, Sensen claims, is not yet a moral notion. It is only through the introduction of a "further moral premise" that dignity is infused with moral import. Only through this additional moral premise are we entitled to say that one has "a *duty* to realize fully one's initial dignity". The traditional conception of dignity has, therefore, two guises: initial dignity and dignity that has been realized (153).

As I indicated above, Sensen's main claim is that Kant's notion of human dignity is best understood within this traditional paradigm. So even in the most famous passages in the *Groundwork* where it sounds as though Kant, in employing the concept "dignity", would ascribe an inner value to humanity, what Kant in fact says, according to Sensen, is that:

Morality is raised above all other forms of behaviour (summary). [...] Morality has not just a subordinate relative value (a price), but an *elevated* inner worth (a dignity in worth). Dignity is used to express the thought that moral worth is *higher than* other worth. While morality has dignity in the sense that it should be sought above all else, humanity has dignity in the

sense of being elevated over the rest of nature in being capable of morality. In the traditional paradigm these are two stages of elevation or dignity. The initial elevation of humanity is only realized if one makes proper sense of one's moral capacity (185 f.).

I'm not entirely convinced that this is an appropriate reading of Kant's conception of dignity. Since Sensen's main claim is a philological one, we will need to turn to the *Groundwork* to assess it. Let us consider one passage from the *Groundwork* cited by Sensen:

What is related to the general human inclinations and needs has a *market price*; [...] but that which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself, this has not merely a relative worth, i.e., Price, but an inner worth, i.e., *dignity*.¹

I take it that Kant introduces an opposition here between relative worth, which he calls "price", and "inner worth", which he calls "dignity". In other words, if something is of relative worth it has its price; if it has inner worth it has dignity. Sensen deliberately wants to avoid this reading:

When Kant uses "dignity" in this context, it could merely be a definition of "inner worth" [...]. However, this usage would be contrary to the vast majority of passages in which Kant uses "dignity" [...]. And the specific meaning of this passage would be lost. [...] What Kant is saying is that morality is more important than other values, i.e., morality is higher or elevated in value. "Dignity" is exactly the term he uses throughout his writings in order to express that something is raised above all else [...]. Accordingly, the phrase "inner worth, that is, dignity" should not be read as a definition of dignity, but as a specification that "inner" is more important than or elevated over "relative".

Granted that in the "majority of passages" "dignity" does mean something else, this is hardly an argument for reading it this way in the passage under consideration. Perhaps the "specific meaning of this passage" can only be understood if we forget about those other passages and focus on the more immediate context.

Let us look at it more closely. In the sentence in question we find a parallel structure. Kant in fact gives two nominal definitions (first of "price", then of "dignity"). Dignity is not, as Sensen assumes, the *definiens* but rather the *definiendum*. If it is granted that Kant defines "price" as something that has "relative worth", there is a good textual basis for reading the parallel construction also as a definition; something has dignity if it has inner worth. Now, Kant's reason

¹ "Was sich auf die allgemeinen menschlichen Neigungen und Bedürfnisse bezieht, hat einen *Marktpreis*; [...] das aber, was die Bedingung ausmacht, unter der allein etwas Zweck an sich selbst sein kann, hat nicht bloß einen relativen Werth, d.i. einen Preis, sondern einen innern Werth, d.i. *Würde*." GMS, AA 04: 434 f.

for introducing this distinction is that he wishes to bring out the condition under which something can be an end in itself. This condition is, as he makes clear in the following sentence, “morality”:

Now morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, since by this alone is it possible that he should be a legislating member in the kingdom of ends. Thus morality, and humanity as capable of it, is that which alone has dignity.²

Why is “morality the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself”? Because only in acting morally well are we acting under the representation of the universalizability of our maxim. And in acting under the representation of the universalizability of our maxim, we are not merely adopting an end in order to achieve some other given end. If this were the case the end we are adopting would not be an end in itself. In morally good volition, the end we are adopting is not merely good in relation to some other given end that we happen to have, but is good independently of any particular end – it is not just an end to bring about some other end, but an “end in itself”. The kingdom of ends is a world governed by moral laws. It should be clear why only a being capable of acting under the representation of universalizable maxims can be a “legislating member in the kingdom of ends”. Now, the conclusion Kant wants to draw from this is the following: “Thus morality, and humanity as capable of it, is that which alone has dignity.” (*Also ist Sittlichkeit und die Menschheit, so fern sie derselben fähig ist, dasjenige, was allein Würde hat.* GMS, AA 04: 435.) Kant does say, as Sensen rightly points out, that morality has dignity. But he also says that “humanity as capable of [morality]” has dignity. Having the capacity for morality does not mean that we have actualized it. Sensen makes that clear by distinguishing between an initial and a realized concept of dignity. So, we can summarize Kant’s argument as follows:

1. That which constitutes the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself has inner worth, i.e. *dignity*.
2. Morality is the condition under which alone a rational being is an end in itself.
3. Therefore, morality, or humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is the only thing that has dignity.

² “Nun ist Moralität die Bedingung, unter der allein ein vernünftiges Wesen Zweck an sich selbst sein kann, weil nur durch sie es möglich ist, ein gesetzgebend Glied im Reiche der Zwecke zu sein. Also ist Sittlichkeit und die Menschheit, so fern sie derselben fähig ist, dasjenige, was allein Würde hat.” GMS, AA 04: 435.

We can clearly see that Kant does want to ascribe an inner worth or dignity to humanity. Again, Sensen is right that the moral law is the source of dignity, but to say that “dignity is only a specification that ‘inner’ is more important than or elevated over ‘relative’” is, I think, misses Kant’s point.

Moreover, Kant explicitly says that even the actions that follow from a good will do have an “inner worth” and, I may add, “dignity”. “Geschicklichkeit und Fleiß im Arbeiten haben einen Marktpreis; [...] dagegen Treue im Versprechen, Wohlwollen aus Grundsätzen (nicht aus Instinct) haben einen innern Werth” (GMS, AA 04: 435). In short: Since the inner worth of a good action as well as the inner worth of humanity as such depends on practical cognition *a priori*, I don’t see any reason why we should resist the claim that Kant ascribes an absolute or inner metaphysical value property both to humanity and to particular morally good actions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sensen’s stimulating and thought provoking book raises a question about whether Kant’s conception of human dignity has been widely misrepresented. The view Sensen criticizes presupposes Moorean value realism, which he thinks leads to the false view that we first perceive that other human beings have value and then infer that we ought to respect them. I agree with Sensen that Kant does not embrace the intuitionist picture. However, I don’t think that this should lead us to conclude that Kant would deny the existence of moral value properties or that Kant is a prescriptivist. Those metaphysical value properties that result from the exercise of our capacity of pure practical reason can be ascribed to our actions or dispositions. In practical cognition, our cognition brings the object into “existence” (see KpV, aa 05: 46; cf. KrV, B IX f.). The object of pure practical reason is the good (see KpV, AA 05: 57 f.). In judging *x* to be practically necessary we thereby judge *x* as something that ought to be willed objectively, i.e. as good. In knowing practically, our cognition affects us through the feeling of respect for the moral law. It is this capacity for respect that makes it possible for the moral law to become a sufficient incentive of the will, which then brings the value property into existence. This is not to say that the objectivity of the moral law consists in the existence of its object, the good, but that the moral law determines the existence of the value property. The moral law itself does not exist in space and time, and is nothing but the articulation of the self-consciousness of pure practical reason (see KpV, AA 05: 29). To think that objectivity in morality requires that the moral law “exists” independently of rational cognizers

is to presuppose a conception of objectivity that Kant's moral philosophy fundamentally calls into question.

I don't think that the prescriptivism that Sensen wants to ascribe to Kant adequately captures his view. If idealism is the view that the existence of objects depends on the cognition of those objects, I would like to suggest that Kant's alternative view, which fundamentally departs from other views in contemporary metaethics, is most accurately represented as "moral idealism" (Bojanowski 2011). In practical cognition the object of my cognition is brought into existence through a kind of self-affection. And the good is realized in that action. My general cast of mind (my *Gesinnung*), as well as the particular action I perform, both have an inner metaphysical moral value.

Sensen seems to think that if we claim that actions have inner moral value we are forced back into moral realism of the Moorean type. But for Kant something can have inner value even though it depends on the practical cognition of rational beings. The value is not relative because it does not depend on having some other, private end. Instead, all rational beings self-consciously cognize the end to be good. In practical cognition we leave our subjective standpoint behind and take on a universal perspective. We are not merely asking whether some action serves our individual purposes (has a relative value), but whether all rational beings would do the same. If it can be agreed on by all rational beings, the action is good independently of my own purpose and therefore good in itself. From here it is only a small step to establishing the inner value of humanity, for only rational beings have the capacity to adopt the universal perspective and act in such a way that their actions have inner value. So if we did not have the capacity to act from universal laws, we would not have inner value and, I might add, dignity. But this last claim would be the beginning of a much longer paper.³

³ Gespräche mit Pauline Kleingeld, Oliver Sensen, Robert Stern und Christoph Horn haben mir geholfen, Oliver Sensen, Kant und mich selbst in dieser Sache besser zu verstehen. Für finanzielle Unterstützung danke ich der Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).