

**Kant's reasoning on suicide from *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals* Chapter 2
(Translated by Christine Korsgaard)**

But suppose there were something whose existence in itself had absolute value, something which as an end in itself could support determinate laws. That would be a basis—indeed the only basis—for a possible categorical imperative, i.e. of a practical law.

There is such a thing! It is a human being! I maintain that man—and in general every rational being—exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion. Whenever he acts in ways directed towards himself or towards other rational beings, a person serves as a means to whatever end his action aims at; but he must always be regarded as also an end. Things that are preferred have only conditional value, for if the preferences (and the needs arising from them) didn't exist, their object would be worthless. That wouldn't count against the 'objects' in question if the desires on which they depend did themselves have unconditional value, but they don't! If the preferences themselves, as the sources of needs, did have absolute value, one would want to have them; but that is so far from the case that every rational being must wish he were altogether free of them. So the value of any objects to be obtained through our actions is always conditional. Beings whose existence depends not on our will but on nature, if they are not rational beings, have only relative value as means, and are therefore called 'things' [Sachen]; whereas rational beings are called 'persons', because their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves (i.e. as not to be used merely as means)—which makes such a being an object of respect, and something that sets limits to what anyone can choose to do.

Such beings are not merely subjective ends whose existence as a result of our action has value for us, but are objective ends, i.e. things [Dinge] whose existence is an end in itself. It is indeed an irreplaceable end: you can't substitute for it something else to which it would be merely a means. If there were no such ends in themselves, nothing of absolute value could be found, and if all value were conditional and thus contingent, no supreme practical principle for reason could be found anywhere. So if there is to be a supreme practical principle, and a categorical imperative for the human will, it must be an objective principle of the will that can serve as a universal law. Why must it? Because it has to be drawn from the conception of something that is an end in itself and therefore an end for everyone.

The basis for this principle is: rational nature exists as an end in itself. Human beings necessarily think of their own existence in this way, which means that the principle holds as a subjective principle of human actions. But every other rational being also thinks of his existence on the same rational ground that holds also for myself; and so it is at the same time an objective principle—one that doesn't depend on contingent facts about this or that subject—a supreme practical ground from which it must be possible to derive all the laws of the will. So here is the practical imperative: Act in such a way as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of anyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means.

Let us now see whether this can be carried out. To return to our previous examples: (1) Someone thinking of committing suicide will, if he is guided by the concept of necessary duty to oneself, ask himself “Could my suicide be reconciled with the idea of humanity as an end in itself?” And his answer to this should be No. If he escapes from his burdensome situation by destroying himself, he is using a person merely as a means to keeping himself in a tolerable condition up to the end of his life. But a man is not a thing [Sache], so he isn’t something to be used merely as a means, and must always be regarded in all his actions as an end in himself. So I can’t dispose of a man by maiming, damaging or killing him—and that includes the case where the man is myself. (This basic principle needs to be refined so as to deal properly with questions such as ‘May I have one of my limbs amputated to save my life?’ and ‘May I expose my life to danger in order to save it?’ I shan’t go into these matters here; they belong to morals and not to the metaphysic of morals.)