

# Philosophy - categorical imperative



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Instructions: APPLIED ARGUMENT: Think about this: The second form of the Categorical Imperative says, ' Act in such a way that you treat humanity (he uses the term " rational nature"), whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means'.

But when precisely are we using someone as a ' mere' means and when are we using someone ' legitimately' as a means to our ends? In life, we use people ' legitimately' as means to our ends all the time. We use the farmer as a means to getting food. Part of the relationship of friendship entails using a friend to get companionship, and likewise, teaching entails using a teacher for learning. So what is a ' mere' means? Is there a line, and when might we cross that line between a ' legitimate' means and ' mere' means?

Let's consider the workplace. It is quite clear that slavery is using someone as a mere means. Holding someone captive and working to another's ends is certainly using him or her as a mere means. Slavery is one extreme. One might say that at the other extreme is the self-employed person who determines his or her own ends and purposes, who decides when and how much to work and at what projects. In between these two extremes are a vast number of different types of work situations.

Kant says we use people as ' mere' means when we determine their ends and purposes for them. Would involving the worker more in the decision-making process of work transform using them as a ' mere' means to using them as a ' legitimate' means?

Have you ever worked or are you working now for minimum wage? At the time of this writing, minimum wage in America is about \$5. 35 per hour, in other words, \$856 per month, and \$9844 per year (with small variations in

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some states). Is the kind of life the wage could provide for the worker a relevant matter in determining a case of 'mere' means?

Does raising someone's salary or giving them a Christmas bonus transform using them as a 'mere' means into using them as a 'legitimate' means? If yes, is there a salary level at which this transformation takes place?

Think about the working conditions for many people earning a wage. It seems that some of the most repugnant jobs are actually the ones paid the least—standing over a hot, greasy French fry station, hard manual labor, cleaning up others' waste, etc. Is the degree that a job is repugnant a meaningful determinant for 'mere' means? If poorly paid repugnant work is one of 'mere' means, and if we raise the wage for repugnant work, does that transform it from 'mere' means to 'legitimate' means?

Maybe wage-labor, because of its very nature, is always using someone as a 'mere' means. In other words, does the fact that workers are in positions where they aren't totally involved in every single decision that determines their own ends, but rather are working to another's ends for a wage, reduce them to being a 'mere' means to those others?

Write about this:

To what extent and under what conditions is wage-labor using someone as a 'mere' means?

According to Marx's socialist economic theory even the capitalists system is based on the exploitation of labor, despite the claims that under such a system the labor is free to work for an agreed wage with an employer he or she chooses. The only difference between slavery and capitalism being the laborer is not tied to an individual capitalist like in slavery but to the capitalist class as a whole. In the present day world, though people have the

liberty to choose which employer he wishes to work with, the amount of wage that he should get is still left to the discretion of the employer. This attitude of the employee to allow him to be used is mainly attributed to illiteracy and poverty.

Thus in a world where illiteracy and poverty is still widely prevalent, it would not be surprising if a wage laborer is used as a mere means. It is under conditions such as these that people are unable to voice out their opinions and tend to obey their employers. Employing children is another way by which an employer uses wage-labor as mere means. Here the poverty of the family is being exploited. Impoverished children just tend to do their jobs and get whatever pay has been fixed for their labor. The stakes are high for the employer in this case as he can get the work done more efficiently in return for a smaller pay.

People employed in smaller organizations who either due to poverty or illiteracy, cannot afford to lose their jobs by standing up against their employers asking for pay hikes continue to work as mere means. Thus improving the literacy rate among citizens is highly important for every developing nation. Immigrant labor who are exposed to an alien foreign land and foreign language, end up doing jobs with meager wages. Immigrant worker percentages are on the rise in several developed countries, as people from the under developed nations continue to throng such places for better employment and wages. But they hardly realize the fact that they will only work towards meeting their employer's end than their own, as that is the prize they will have to pay to be employed in a foreign land. By the time, the immigrant learns the rules of the game in that land, he would have already allowed himself to be used as a mere means by his employer. Forced

prostitution constitutes another form of wage labor where ignorant people get used and exploited for the benefit of others. Once they get into the trade there is hardly a way out.

In all the above cases, employers take the sole responsibility in determining the rules and wage for the labor. The employee has literally no say. All that is required from him is to do the work and get the fixed pay. Hence there is a need to understand how exactly the capitalist world works and thereby prevent the situation where people would be reduced to work as mere means.