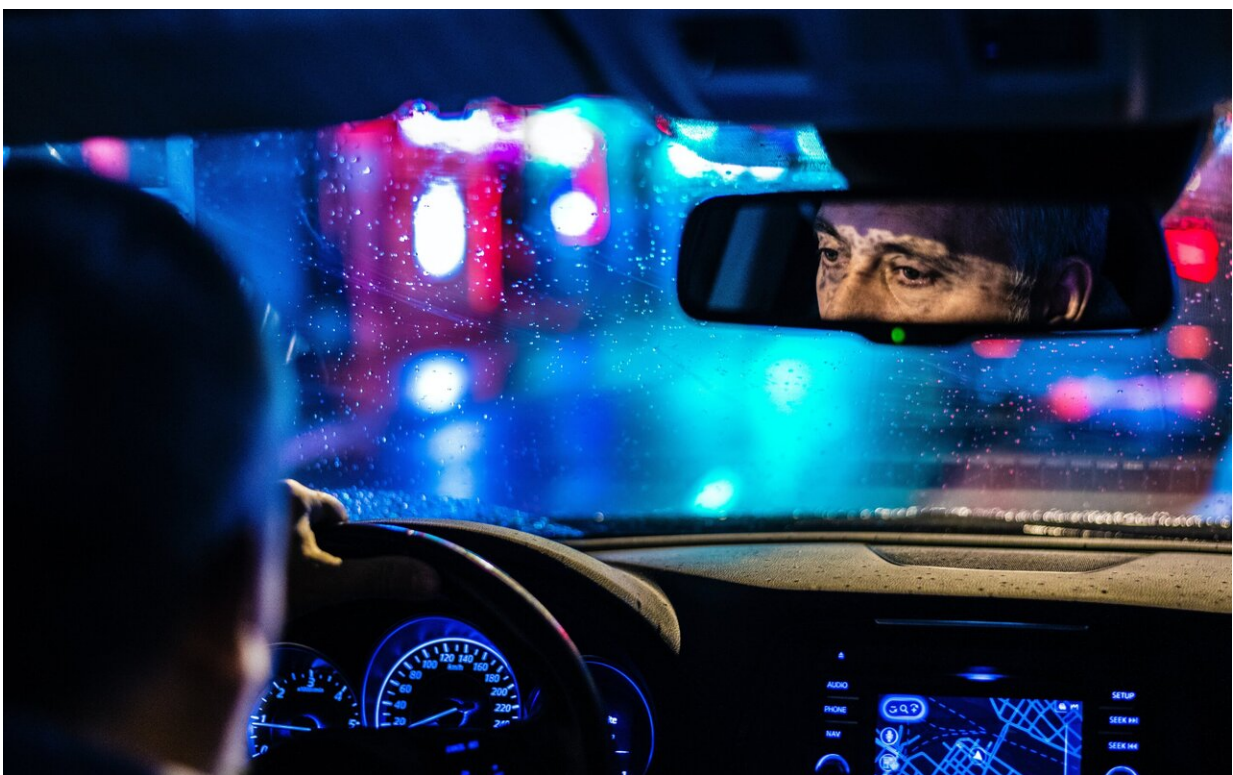


Two faces of dignity: A Kantian perspective on ride share drivers' fight for decent working conditions

November 6 2023, by Corinna Mieth and Sophie Bernard



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On November 3, 2016, Emmanuel Macron, who had recently launched a presidential bid, mentioned what he felt was Uber's positive role in providing work opportunities to low-income or unemployed youth (our

translation and emphasis):

"You go to Stains [a low-income town outside of Paris] to tell [young people](#) who are Uber drivers that it is better to loiter or deal [...]. Our collective failure is that the neighborhoods where Uber hires these young people are neighborhoods where we haven't managed to offer them anything else. Yes, they sometimes work 60 to 70 hours to get the [minimum wage](#), but they return with dignity, they find a job, they put on a suit and a tie."

A year later, the perspective of many Uber drivers in Paris was quite different, as witnessed by a handout distributed by an activist group in November 2017:

"You've been used by Uber, regain your dignity!" ("UberUsé, regagne ta dignité!")

Dignity as work

These two quotes refer to quite distinct concepts of dignity. On the one hand, French president Emmanuel Macron tells unemployed youth from [low-income](#) towns they ought to consider themselves lucky when Uber offers them the opportunity to don a suit and a tie and get behind the wheel. On the other, Uber drivers see themselves as being exploited by management and are ready to put up a fight to regain their dignity. So does Uber restore or take away workers' dignity?

The French president's notion of dignity is what some philosophers refer to as social standing dignity, the traditional conception (Sensen 2011). Rooted in an individual's rank or office, it centers on the world of behavioral rules, rights and duties that surround these positions.

Hierarchical societies are structured through higher and lower social

positions and with each one comes different ranks and different degrees of dignity. Thus, Macron contends that young people from poor areas are better off by taking on work from Uber, even if this means long hours and low wages. Here, employment is presented as the fundamental condition to social dignity.

Migrant roots

It is important to note that most people who take on an Uber job hail from a migrant background, sometimes stretching back to several generations. In France, these are mainly from North and Sub-Saharan Africa. As the [sociological research from Sophie Bernard shows](#), most were not unemployed before. Instead, they took on unskilled, low-paying, painful, and precarious jobs—quite a different situation to trafficking drugs or loitering. They became Uber drivers to improve their condition by gaining freedom and higher wages.

But they soon realized they were subjected to a new form of algorithmic management and forced to work more and more to earn less and less. This form of control is exercised remotely and indirectly by algorithms that enable the quasi-automatic supervision of many workers.

Drivers are rated by customers for every journey they make. All it takes is one complaint from a customer for their account to be deactivated. Uber drivers are no longer subject to hierarchical control, but rather to customer demands. Nor are they totally free to organize their working hours as they see fit.

To entice drivers to work for Uber, the company first offered them bonuses and high remuneration. Once the platform has enough drivers, [it removes the bonuses, lowers the fares and increases the commission](#).

While they thought they were improving their conditions, they found

themselves once again in another job as exploited migrants. As if Macron were telling them: "We have this opportunity for you to gain your social dignity with a job that other people in our society don't want and don't need, but it's good enough for you."

Kant's concept of equal moral worth

The second notion of dignity is that of human dignity, the idea that was implemented into the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and into many constitutions after the Second World War. It is expressed in Kant's idea of equal moral worth of all human beings. In his famous [*Formula of Humanity*](#) of the Categorical Imperative, Kant states:

"So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."

Is that the notion Uber drivers can refer to? As we will see it is, but it needs some clarification, and Kantian philosophy has its blind spots when it comes to dignity violations. What does it mean to use someone merely as a means? Kantians think that you are used as a mere means if you cannot (reasonably) consent to the treatment of others.

This is especially so if your will is manipulated by deception or coercion. According to Kant, this is addressed by the criteria of deception and coercion that manipulate or enforce consent. Now one could wonder what the problem is from a Kantian perspective, since Uber drivers took on the job willingly, as Macron emphasizes.

And indeed, Kant did not think in categories like exploitation. We think that exploitation can also be understood in terms of instrumentalisation.

The accusation that Uber drivers formulate: "UberUsé" refers directly to

this: not to be used merely as a means to another's purposes; not to be exploited, in the sense that platform capitalism puts you in a position where long working hours don't give you the minimum wage, where you take all the risks for a platform that reaps all the benefits, where there's no reasonable alternative for you and where there's reasonable alternatives to pay you a decent wage for Uber, since their profit would allow for it.

Let's remember that while Uber defines drivers as self-employed workers who provide the platform with labor and part of the production tools, it is the platform that sets the prices and takes a commission on each trip by passing on all the risks.

Moreover, there is another problem, and this one cannot be captured by the Kantian prohibition of instrumentalisation. It is the unequal social positions in a hierarchical and racist society that lead to an inequality of opportunity. This goes against the Kantian requirement to treat others as ends in themselves: as persons with equal moral standing.

Degradation of migrants in the form: "this job is good enough for you" contradicts that requirement. So what Uber drivers could see violated on Kantian terms is their human dignity, their equal moral standing, that would recommend to provide them with equal opportunities in the French society and not just with opportunities that are "good enough for them" because "their" social standing is already at the bottom.

What is striking about how Uber drivers' striving for social dignity can be abused when it comes to exploitation of their work force. As they fight Uber's working conditions, they are more faithful to Western Kant-induced values than Macron. The president, by contrast, offers them a glimpse of social dignity in a kind of job that keeps them in an exploitative and precarious situation.

One could say in the spirit of Kant that Uber drivers show self-esteem by their protest which aims at (re)gaining their dignity. Kant states in the Doctrine of Virtue: "Do not let others tread with impunity on your rights."

As [Mieth and Williams argue](#), there are wrongs beyond instrumentalisation when it comes to migration, which concern exclusion and inequality. Under the circumstances Uber drivers find themselves in, they put on a fight to express their human dignity, not their social dignity in Macron's terms.

But this human dignity implies social dignity in another sense: to be acknowledged as an equal member of society which implies equality of opportunity. So we think that Uber drivers' fight to regain dignity is in line with Kant's notion of human dignity. Their protest is even giving the notion of equal human dignity reality.

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