

KANT ON VIRTUE: SEEKING THE IDEAL IN HUMAN CONDITIONS

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Abstract: Immanuel Kant defines virtue as a kind of strength and resoluteness of will to resist and overcome any obstacles that oppose fulfilling our moral duties. Human agents, according to Kant, owe it to ourselves to strive for perfect virtue by fully committing ourselves to morality and by developing the fortitude to maintain and execute this life-governing policy despite obstacles we may face. This essay reviews basic features of Kant's conception of virtue and then discusses the role of emotions, a motive of duty, exemplars, rules, and community in a virtuous life. Kant thinks that striving to be more virtuous requires not only respect for moral principles and control of our contrary emotions but also a system of legally enforced rules and communities of good persons. Exemplars and cultivated good feelings and emotions can also be useful aids along the way, but Kant warns us against attempting to derive our moral standards themselves from examples or feelings. The best any of us can hope for, in Kant's view, is to make constant progress in our difficult struggle for moral perfection.

Keywords: Kant, Virtue, Community, Emotion, Rules, Exemplars

The early Latin and Greek terms for virtue, Kant notes, originally meant courage, strength and valor in the face of a strong but evil enemy.¹ The symbol for virtue was

¹ MM 6:380; R 6:57; V 27:492. Kant's texts are referenced by these symbols followed by volume and page numbers in the standard Prussian Academy Edition:

thought to be Hercules who bravely subdued all vice in the form of the hydra.² Kant returns to this ancient understanding of virtue by defining it as a kind of strength and resoluteness of will to resist and overcome obstacles that oppose fulfilling our moral duties.³ The obstacles on which Kant focuses are the tendencies we have to indulge our natural desires, impulses and inclinations when they tempt us to act in ways that conflict with moral demands.⁴ Although we may speak of many virtues (corresponding to different kinds of duty), there is only one true virtue, which is the wholehearted commitment and effective capacity to fulfill our moral duties out of respect for the moral law despite our tendencies to indulge our opposing natural desires.⁵

Moral laws, on Kant's view, are objective, unconditional and necessary principles of reason. Principles of *right* concern external acts that can be coercively enforced by others. Principles of *ethics* concern the ends and maxims that we ought to adopt even though we cannot be forced by others to do so. Among Kant's ethical principles are specific duties of beneficence, respect and gratitude as well as prohibitions on suicide,

G – *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*

MM – *The Metaphysics of Morals*

R – *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*

CPR – *Critique of Pure Reason*

CPrR – *Critique of Practical Reason*

CJ – *Critique of the Power of Judgment*

A – *Anthropology, History, and Education*

PP – *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics*

TP – 'On the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory, but It Does Not Hold in Practice'

IUH – 'Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective'

CB – 'Conjectural Beginnings of Human History'

E – 'An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?'

CF – 'The Conflict of the Faculties'

LP – 'Lectures on Pedagogy'

C – 'Moral Philosophy: Collins's Lecture Notes'

V – 'Kant on the Metaphysics of Morals: Vigilantius's Lecture Notes'

² MM 6:380; V 27:492.

³ MM 6:205-221, 380, 405-8, 477. See also (Allison, 1990, pp. 162-179); (Guyer, 2000, pp. 303-323); and (Wood, 2008, pp. 142-158).

⁴ R 6:29.

⁵ MM 6:380; 383; 390.

lying, and servility. Also we must comply with all moral requirements simply because they are demands of authoritative moral laws.⁶ These juridical and ethical principles are ways of interpreting and applying the Categorical Imperative to human conditions.⁷

Human beings, according to Kant, are subject to natural and rational motivations that often conflict with one another but he also thinks we have a free power of choice, which is susceptible to competing natural and rational desires but not necessarily determined by any of them.⁸ All rationally competent persons inevitably recognize moral principles as authoritative, but each individual must decide whether to fulfill or to violate them.⁹ Moral *duties* and *imperatives*, in Kant's view, are principles of morality addressed to rational agents who are disposed to comply with them but who can also choose to indulge their opposing inclinations instead.¹⁰ Kant thinks that human persons are always reluctant to break the moral law, even when we nonetheless choose to do so, because we experience our rational desires as constraints that oppose our natural inclinations; yet he also thinks that our natural inclinations often make us reluctant to follow the moral law as well when, as often happens, they oppose our doing so.¹¹

We can exercise our power of choice by adopting and revising policies, commitments and principles for how we resolve to conduct ourselves. These resolutions, according to Kant, can be regarded as something like promises we make to ourselves.¹²

We also have the power, in Kant's view, to decide on particular occasions whether or not

⁶ MM 6:219-21, 394.

⁷ G 4:413-421.

⁸ MM 6:213, 218, 226; G 4: 414; 439.

⁹ Kant held out hope that all human beings are *persons*, who are, as such, rationally disposed to comply with moral requirements. It is possible, however, that some human beings, such as those we now call as psychopaths, lack this rational disposition, although he thinks it would be difficult to know for sure that someone altogether lacked any moral motivation.

¹⁰ MM 6:218, 379.

¹¹ MM 6:379-380.

¹² V 27:656-7.

to execute or live up to the principles and policies that we have settled on.¹³ A human person with a *good will* has adopted a commitment to morality and has made it her most basic life-governing standard.¹⁴ A fully *virtuous* person not only has a good will but she also maintains and executes this policy on every occasion despite temptations she may have to the contrary.¹⁵ Our natural desires, according to Kant, can interfere with both aspects of moral perfection, that of having a good will and of being virtuous. They can lead us to question and alter our basic moral commitments in the service of other ends or principles that we favor, thereby leading us to abandon our good will. And our natural desires can dissuade us from living up to the moral commitments we have adopted for ourselves, thereby exposing our moral weakness or lack of virtue.

Kant claims that it is impossible for human beings to eliminate our natural desires and our tendencies to indulge them in immoral ways, so even virtuous people will at times be tempted to alter or violate their moral commitments.¹⁶ He also argues that the best that human beings can hope for is continual and unending progress toward virtue that “can never settle down in peace and quiet with its maxims adopted once and for all.”¹⁷ Although virtue can never be fully achieved in this life by our own efforts, Kant claims that we have reason to strive for it and hope that achieving perfect virtue is nevertheless possible in ways that we cannot comprehend.¹⁸

¹³ LP 9:487-8; V 27:656-7. See also (Hill, 2012a) and, for a competing view, see Cureton, Adam (in press), ‘Kant on Cultivating a Good and Stable Will’, in Iskra Fileva (ed.), *Perspectives on Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

¹⁴ G 4: 394-402. A good will in this sense is a person’s resolution to do one’s duty from duty, which is distinct from the inevitable predisposition to morality that, in Kant’s view, all moral agents possess.

¹⁵ MM 6:380, 383-384, 387, 390, 394, 404-10, 479-80; R 6:29-39.

¹⁶ MM 6:213-15.

¹⁷ MM 6:409. See also MM 6:384, 405, 447.

¹⁸ R 6:4-7, 97-8; CPrR 5:110-32.

In Kant's works on pedagogy and practical anthropology, he describes some of the empirical conditions that he thinks will help to prepare children for virtue. Children, Kant claims, are born with a moral predisposition or "germ" that parents and teachers must help to nurture and develop.¹⁹ Initially, children must be subjected to discipline that sets constraints on their "lawless freedom," but once they reach the age of reason, children must be taught to "make good use of [their] freedom."²⁰ A child's natural desires for honor and love can be used as "aids to morality" while the child's latent notion of dignity should be made "perceptible" to her.²¹ The Socratic method should also be used to elicit a "dry and earnest representation of duty" from the child, to help her refine her powers of moral judgment, to lead her to admire those who display a firm and steady resolve to do their duty from duty, and to bring out an awareness and exaltation of her ability to master her inclinations and to govern herself by reason.²²

Once a person has reached the stage in which her rational capacities are sufficiently developed that her actions can be fully imputed to her, she is then under a self-regarding and imperfect duty to continue developing her own moral powers.²³ Scrutinizing our motives and principles, listening to our conscience, practicing virtuous acts and keeping the basic moral law before our minds can all help us to strive for moral perfection.²⁴ But, in Kant's view, there are no specific steps or empirical conditions that can guarantee progress toward moral perfection because this is ultimately a matter of freely adopting, maintaining and executing a basic commitment to morality.²⁵

¹⁹ LP 9:445.

²⁰ LP 9:453, 459; C 27:467; CJ 5: 431.

²¹ LP 9:482-4, 489.

²² CPrR 5:35, 154, 160-1; MM 480-84; R 6: 48; LP 9:490.

²³ MM 6:385-388, 391-394.

²⁴ MM 6:387, 397, 400, 441, 484.

²⁵ MM 6:447.

The place of feelings and emotions in a virtuous life

Although Kant held that feelings and emotions are often obstacles to clear thinking and good moral decision-making, he claimed that some feelings are simply aspects of all moral experience and others should be cultivated aids in our efforts to avoid wrongdoing and to promote moral ends. Kant's position is complex and often misunderstood.

Consider, first, the context of moral decision-making. Here Kant calls attention to the fact that our passions often cloud our judgments and seduce us away from what we know is the right path. Some emotions, such as malicious envy, are bad in themselves, but even inherently good or innocent feelings, such as affection for a friend, can on occasion tempt us to neglect our moral responsibilities. Few would deny these elementary observations, but Kant's explanation points to a deeper philosophical controversy about the nature of moral judgment and motivation. What enables us to tell the difference between right and wrong? And why does the distinction matter to us? Kant argues that particular moral judgments are ultimately based on principles of practical reason, not on human sentiments. In making particular moral judgments, of course, we need to try to understand the empirical facts of the case at hand. As philosophers, in using the basic moral principles (as expressed in the Categorical Imperative) to articulate and defend more specific (mid-level) principles for recurring human conditions, we need also to take into account general anthropological facts about human nature. Facts about feelings and emotions can be relevant as data at both stages. The aim is to determine what we ought to do, that is, what we imperfectly rational agents have compelling moral reason to do. Kant argued that common morality presupposes that

we can make judgments from this moral point of view and that insofar as we are rational agents we can act on the basis of these judgments. When our strong passions distort our judgment and prompt us to abandon our good will, this is not (as Hume famously argued) because violent passions overwhelm the “calm passions” aligned with morality. Rather, we allow our emotions to cloud our rational judgment and we choose to follow our feelings rather than reason.

Consider now the contexts of moral assessment and aspiration. To assess whether a person was virtuous or her particular act had “moral worth” we would need to know what motivated the person, and Kant repeatedly warns that we can never know for certain what maxims a person was acting on. Nevertheless, Kant thought that the *ideas* of virtue and morally worthy actions can prod our consciences and inspire us to respect the priority of morality over self-love. The primary question in ethics for each person is “What ought *I* to do?” The question arises from a first-personal perspective, focused on one’s alternatives for choice now and for the future rather than on third-personal judgments of praiseworthiness or blameworthiness for past acts or character. From the agent’s first-personal perspective, the *ideas* of perfect virtue and morally worthy acts can inspire us towards moral improvement, even though our progress cannot be measured. In Kant’s view, we must rely on reason, not sentiment, to determine what we ought to do now, what we ought to resolve for the future, and what sort of persons we should try to become. The rational ideas of perfect virtue and morally worthy action can help to guide our judgments and constrain our acts independently of how we are disposed to feel. Our feelings and emotions, though potentially relevant, do not provide the answer to the primary ethical question.

More positively, what role do feelings and emotions play in a moral life? *First*, Kant held that the feeling of respect for the moral law is an experiential expression of our inescapable recognition of moral requirements. The feeling is the product, not the cause, of our moral consciousness. A feeling of respect for the moral law, as we might say, is concept-dependent because it cannot be understood apart from its reference to an authoritative standard. Other moral feelings, such as guilt, shame, and the satisfaction of having done one's duty, are similar in these respects. *Second*, Kant notes that positive feelings of caring for others can counteract contrary inclinations, and so such affectionate feelings should be cultivated as an aid in our efforts to avoid wrongdoing. *Finally*, the healthy feelings and emotions, when morally constrained, are integral to human happiness, and, Kant argues, we have an imperfect duty to adopt the happiness of others as an end as well as a permission and an indirect duty to pursue our own happiness. Even when we act well in other respects, if we do so grumpily, wallow in self-pity, or indulge our needless fears, malicious envy, or bitter resentments we will inevitably diminish others' happiness as well as our own.

The place of the motive of duty in a virtuous life

In Kant's view, *law* makes demands on what we do and enforces these demands (for example, by threats of punishment), but for the most part law is not concerned with why we conform to its demands.²⁶ State laws, for example, can require citizens to pay taxes but not that they do so eagerly, lovingly, or from duty. The fundamental aim of a just legal system is not to make citizens virtuous but to affirm and secure citizen's equal freedom to act without wrongful interference from others. *Ethics*, in contrast, requires

²⁶ Note, however, MM 6:228.

not only that we behave in the right way but also that we do so for the right reasons. We have an indirect ethical duty to conform to legal duties but we have direct “duties of virtue” to adopt two fundamental ends – one’s own perfection and the happiness of others. The ethical duties are not merely to behave in ways that in fact promote these ends but also to make it a principle (or maxim) to promote them. Moreover, we must make this our principle because it is right (out of respect for moral law), not simply because it makes us happy or promotes our personal ends. If we are fortunate, adopting “the ends that are duties” may contribute to our happiness and encourage others to help us in our own personal projects, but for a virtuous person the fact that adopting and pursuing these ends is morally obligatory is a sufficient reason by itself to do so. We must strive to develop and improve in virtue, which is understood as an effective capacity to promote these ends and avoid all wrong-doing “from duty.”²⁷

Understandably readers are puzzled and sometimes repelled by Kant’s frequent references to doing one’s duty *from duty*, and so it is important to separate several different claims that might be thought to be involved. Consider the extreme claim that (1) we ought always to be thinking explicitly of *the moral law* and moved by that thought whenever we conform to duty. If acting from duty means being moved at that time by an explicit thought of some formula of the Categorical Imperative, then (1) is an unrealistic demand and arguably we should not even try to fulfill it. Consider, for example, negative duties. We are constantly *conforming* to negative duties whenever we do not engage in fraud, murder, and rape. Decent people avoid these crimes routinely and without needing to think explicitly of the Categorical Imperative or any other abstract foundational principle. Normally the question whether or not to do these things does not arise and if it

²⁷ MM 6:446

did decent people would not be tempted. They stand ready to refuse any proposal to use these as means even to good ends because they see these acts as wrong. If pressed, they might struggle to articulate the basic reasons in the way that would satisfy philosophers but even if they could not do so, they would nonetheless understand and deeply care that fraud, murder and rape are morally wrong. Similarly, when good people conform to a positive duty, such as helping a friend or teaching a favorite class, they do not (and probably cannot) always have a formula of *the moral law* explicitly in mind. Normally they help friends and fulfill their contracts gladly without explicit thought of abstract principles even though they understand that they are doing something obligatory.

Suppose, then, that we need not always be thinking explicitly of a formulation of the moral law when we fulfill our duties. A more limited thesis that may be closer to Kant's intentions would be (2) that in conforming to duty a perfectly virtuous person always would, and so ideally we should, recognize and be moved by the thought that our conformity is morally obligatory.²⁸ This does not require having an explicit formulation of the moral law in mind. To think that an act is a *duty* is to think that whether or not one happens to be inclined to fulfill it there are good and sufficient moral reasons to do so, but we can (and ordinarily do) think this without having ready a full explanation that refers back to the moral law as the ultimate ground of all moral judgments. So (2) seems more tenable than (1), but (2) is still at odds with common opinion for many cases.

Intuitively, when we conform to duty, sometimes we should be consciously thinking of duty and sometimes not. For example, as a conscientious juror deciding how to vote one

²⁸ Kant implies that virtue, as a kind of "strength of soul," can vary in degree from perfect virtue, which Kant represents as "a+," to utter weakness, which he represents as "0," but weakness is not the same as vice, which Kant represents as "-a." A person with the vice of ingratitude, for example, rejects the Kantian principle that he ought to honor his benefactors, but a morally weak person (deficient in virtue) accepts the principle but to some degree neglects to act accordingly (MM 6:384, 390).

should keep in mind a juror's moral duty to make a fair and informed decision, but as a parent giving loving care to one's children normally not thinking of duty at the time does not show that one is deficient in virtue.

Kant's texts sometime suggest the intuitively implausible (1) and (2), and perhaps he meant to affirm at least (2) for cases in which the choice between duty and inclination is evident. Arguably, however, his important core claim is simply that (3) we ought always to treat moral duty as a sufficient reason for conforming to its requirements.²⁹ That is, we should maintain the *steadfast attitude* that if an act is wrong we will not do it and if it is a positive duty then we will do it. This steadfast attitude, in Kant's theory, is a *good will* or, in other words, a wholehearted commitment to the fundamental life-governing maxim that moral requirements have priority over self-love or any other competing maxims.³⁰ Serious commitment to this attitude (a good will) implies that we will take the necessary means to implement it. This requires, first, listening to warnings of conscience and, when reasonable doubts arise, being diligent in determining, without self-deception, what is really right.³¹

The place of exemplars in a virtuous life

What is the role of exemplars of virtue in moral theory and in everyday life?

According to Aristotle and contemporary virtue ethics it is important to have real models of virtue to emulate so that we can acquire virtues by practicing what the exemplar does

²⁹ See Baron, Marcia (1995), *Kantian Ethics Almost without Apology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), Herman, Barbara (2007), 'Making Room for Character', *Moral Literacy* (New York: Harvard University Press), 1-28, Hill, Thomas E. (2012c), 'Kant's Tugendlehre as Normative Ethics', *Virtue, Rules, and Justice: Kantian Aspirations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 234-55.

³⁰ G 4:393-99, R 6:36.

³¹ R 6:184-7; MM 6:401, 437-40; E 8:35-42. See also Hill, Thomas E. (2012b), 'Moral Responsibilities of Bystanders', *Virtue, Rules, and Justice: Kantian Aspirations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 343-57.

until it becomes habitual (“second nature”).³² Also many believe that we should use stories about legendary leaders and heroes of extraordinary courage, wisdom, and magnanimity to teach and inspire both children and adults by their example. In addition, some say, exemplars can serve to guide moral judgment because the right thing to do can be defined as doing what a virtuous person would do in the context.³³ Kant disagreed on all three points. He took a more qualified view of the role of exemplars in moral education, he opposed the use of examples of super-heroic deeds to inspire moral conduct, and he flatly rejected the idea we can determine what we ought to do by observing people of exemplary virtue.

First, although Kant agreed that having a good role model can be important in early education, he resisted any suggestion that acquiring virtue is simply a matter of acquiring *habits* of correct behavior and apt feelings.³⁴ Virtue requires doing what is right for the right reasons. Kant understood that good teachers can help to protect and cultivate the innate capacity of *children* to live a moral life, but to be virtuous one must have a good will, which is a will to do one’s duty from duty.³⁵ This requires an implicit grasp of the fundamental principle of morality (“the moral law”) and a personal commitment (or “will”) to conform to its requirements because one recognizes them as authoritative “commands of reason” rather than merely accepted social norms, prudential advice, or

³² Aristotle and Irwin, Terence (1999), *Nicomachean Ethics* (2nd edn.; Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub. Co.).

³³ Hursthouse, Rosalind (1999), *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Mayo, Bernard (1958), *Ethics and the Moral Life* (London: Macmillan) 183-232, Swanton, Christine (2003), *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

³⁴ MM 6:483-4, 407, 409, 479-80; R 46-7.

³⁵ LP 9:440-45, 459, 481-92. See also Cureton, Adam and Hill, Thomas E. (2014), 'Kant on Virtue and the Virtues', in Nancy E. Snow (ed.), *Cultivating Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 87-110., (especially 97-102).

demands from one's parents, legal authorities, or an all-powerful deity.³⁶ Only adults are mature enough to have the basic understanding needed for them to be responsible moral agents, and whether one has a good or bad will, in Kant's view, is not the product of natural and social forces but is due to the free (and ultimately inexplicable) choice of each person.³⁷ Virtuous persons would *invariably* choose to do what is right, but their constancy as responsible adults is not to be explained by citing their good *habits* generated by practice in emulating exemplars.³⁸

Second, Kant objected to trying to cultivate virtue by focusing attention on extraordinarily saintly and heroic deeds.³⁹ The moral task is to do one's duty in every context, no matter how ordinary and undramatic this may be. This is hard enough, especially given that virtue requires one to do one's duty out of respect for the moral law. Although even ordinary people may sometimes face challenges that call for extraordinary strength of will, focusing our attention on the grand accomplishments of saints and heroes, as we imagine them, tends to distract us and divert our energies from the less spectacular but real moral tasks that we face every day.

Third, Kant's standard for morally right conduct was the Categorical Imperative, which expressed his basic principles regarding how we ought to act and what ends we ought to adopt. We have a *good will* if we resolve wholeheartedly to do what we morally ought to do because it is right, and we have *virtue* if our will to carry out this resolve is strong enough to overcome temptations that might undermine our efforts to carry it out successfully. So in Kant's view the *definition* or *basic standard* of morally right action

³⁶ G 4:413-18, 441-444.

³⁷ R 6:21-26.

³⁸ MM 6:446.

³⁹ CPrR 5:155, 157; R 6:49

cannot be *doing what a virtuous person would do*, for there is no standard of virtue (or the virtues) that is independent of the moral law expressed in the Categorical Imperative. A virtuous person, of course, will act rightly and we should do so as well. In this trivial sense, we should always do what a virtuous person would do in our situation, but any virtuous person would do what is required by Kant's fundamental principles, which set the standard for moral choice.

Kant could not appeal to exemplars in just the way that virtue theorists have done because he was skeptical that we could ever find an actual example of a perfectly virtuous person. Kant repeatedly warns that it is impossible to fathom the depths of our own hearts, and our observations of other apparently good people are never sufficient to ensure that their motives are pure.⁴⁰ Even if (as many suppose) there has existed a perfectly virtuous person, we could not derive our moral standards from that person because we must use our moral standards to identify the person as virtuous.⁴¹ The advice "Do what Jesus (or Muhammad) would do!" may remind religious people of the moral values that led them to identify the inspirational role model as virtuous, but it relies on their prior grasp of the standards that their exemplar represents to them.⁴²

Although Kant rejects the use of actual exemplars in the ways that other theorists recommend, he does not deny that examples of (apparently) good (and bad) people can be useful in some contexts.⁴³ More importantly, however, in Kant's theory *the ideas* of a

⁴⁰ G 4:407.

⁴¹ G 4:408-9.

⁴² G 4: 408-9.

⁴³ Kant, for example, held that the French Revolution "finds in the hearts of all spectators (who are not engaged in this game themselves) a wishful *participation*" despite his belief that they acted wrongly in service of their worthy ideals (CF 7:85). He thought that examples of good people can focus our attention on the moral law, reveal our own capacity to comply with the requirements of morality, strike down our selfish tendencies and prompt the workings of our conscience (G 4:402; CPrR 5:76-7). And, Kant claimed that scandalous behavior can serve as a warning to us, but such public expressions of immorality can also

person of good will and perfect virtue serve as exemplars-in-thought partly analogous to actual exemplars in other theories.⁴⁴ In the first section of the *Groundwork*, for example, Kant begins with the assertion that only a good will can be conceived as good without qualification. He attributes the *idea* of a person who has this unqualifiedly good will to common rational knowledge of morality, and he uses this idea in his initial attempt to “seek out” the supreme principle of morality.⁴⁵ He argues that by his analytical method he can uncover the standard of morally worthy action implicit in this common moral idea, but he acknowledges that this method does not establish or prove the validity of the supreme principle. Here in effect Kant appeals to the common *idea of a morally good person* in order to reach a principle (the Categorical Imperative) that, among other things, can guide moral decision-making, but in Kant’s view the standard is implicit in the idea rather than drawn from actual examples. Later in *The Metaphysics of Morals* Kant holds out the idea of a *person of perfect virtue* as exemplifying the kind of person that we should aspire to be, even though life is at best an endless attempt to improve in virtue and we have no measure of our progress.⁴⁶ Here the idea of a perfectly virtuous human being serves not only to inspire us but also to guide insofar as it represents an instantiation of the formal aim of morality – always to do one’s duty from duty. Kant also writes of the “idea” and “ideal” of “humanity” as representations of human capacities and their perfection, not as a list of properties but ideas of them as combined in an individual.⁴⁷

tempt us to follow suit (PP 8:346; MM 6:394, 445, 460, 464). See also O'Neill, Onora (1986), 'The Power of Example', *Philosophy*, 61 (235), 5-29.

⁴⁴ An *idea* in Kant’s technical sense is “a necessary concept of reason...., one to which no congruent object can be given in the senses” (CPR A327).

⁴⁵ G 4:395-403.

⁴⁶ MM 6:446-7.

⁴⁷ See, for example, MM 6:418. See also Dean, Richard (2013), 'Humanity as an Idea, as an Ideal, and as an End in Itself', *Kantian Review*, 18 (2), 171-95. As Dean notes, ‘Idea’ properly means a rational concept, while an ‘ideal’ is the “presentation of an individual being as adequate to an idea” (CJ 5:232).

These ideas of a good will, perfect virtue, and humanity are not empirical concepts, abstracted from our experience with actual human beings, but ideas of reason by which we judge how we ought to think and act.

The place of community in a virtuous life

What is the role of communities in a moral life? Kant's ideas about the moral and non-moral value of communities are quite rich and nuanced. Communities of various kinds, according to Kant, are both the greatest obstacles, as well as the best means, to approaching perfect virtue. This is often missed by critics who object that Kant denied or downplayed the value of community and the essential role that communities of various kinds play in giving shape and meaning to our lives and in developing our moral capacities and other worthwhile traits and skills.⁴⁸

Human beings, according to Kant, have a variety of sociable desires and inclinations that tend to lead us to value close personal relationships, community ties and joint-projects, which for many of us are inextricably bound with our conceptions of happiness and meaning in life.⁴⁹ Yet Kant thinks that human nature also includes many unsociable desires and inclinations that are destructive to personal relationships, communities and societies.⁵⁰ Our unsociable inclinations have a tendency to destabilize personal relationships and community bonds.⁵¹ And, as we shall see, Kant regards our unsociable propensities as significant impediments to moral progress.

⁴⁸ Aristotle and Irwin, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Crisp, Roger and Slote, Michael A. (1997), *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford Readings in Philosophy; Oxford: Oxford University Press), McDowell, John (1994), *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), *ibid.*, Sandel, Michael J. (1998), *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (2nd edn.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), Taylor, Charles (1989), *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), *ibid.*

⁴⁹ R 6:26-7; MM 6:401-2, 456-7, 471-2; LP 9:482, 484-5, 492, 498; A 7:278-9; IUH 8:21; CJ 5:296-7, 355.

⁵⁰ MM 6:470; IUH 8:20-22; A 7:265-277; G 4:424; R 6:27, 93-4; CB 8:120; CJ 5:42-3; LP 9:492, 498.

⁵¹ CJ 5:276; A 7:270.

Kant thought that associations and communities of various types are morally good as effective and in some cases as essential means to the development and full realization of our rational capacities.⁵²

First, when we are in associations, we tend to develop and exercise taste, which is the faculty to make judgments of beauty on the basis of disinterested pleasures that can be communicated and shared by all. As this faculty develops, a person tends to have less concern for an object of his crude and vehement inclinations if he cannot “feel his satisfaction in it in community with others.”⁵³ This sort of training, which calls on our higher powers of imagination and understanding, helps us to develop our capacity to freely choose our own ends by reducing “the tyranny of sensible tendencies” and it paves the way for morality by preparing “humans for a sovereignty in which reason alone shall have power.”⁵⁴

Second, certain communities, associations and societies tend to help people to develop the natural talents and abilities that allow them to pursue whatever ends they may freely choose. Such groups often provide opportunities for experimentation, practice and instruction, which are necessary for human beings to perfect our natural abilities over many generations.⁵⁵

Third, there is one sort of community that Kant thinks is absolutely essential for us to become truly virtuous, namely an ethical commonwealth. The most challenging obstacles we face to achieving moral perfection are, according to Kant, other human beings, and in particular the ways they tend to enliven our unsociable inclinations when

⁵² MM 6:386-7, 391-3, 444-7; LP 9:449; CB 8:116-18; CJ 5:431.

⁵³ CJ 5:297

⁵⁴ CJ 5:433. See also CJ 5:297, 355-6; A 5:297-8.

⁵⁵ IUH 8:18-23; LP 9:445.

we are in association with them.⁵⁶ Even if someone, by his own efforts, managed to achieve some degree of virtue, “he would still be held in incessant danger of relapsing into” an immoral character because his moral predispositions are “incessantly attacked by the evil which is found in him and in every other as well.”⁵⁷ To the best of our knowledge, Kant thinks, the only way human beings can counteract these dangers is by establishing an ethical commonwealth, which is “an enduring and ever expanding society, solely designed for the preservation of morality by counteracting evil with united forces.”⁵⁸ Everyone has a duty to establish or join an ethical community because the only way for people of good will to come close to moral perfection is “a union of such persons into a whole toward that very end.”⁵⁹ That is, human beings must come together in an ethical community in order to create the circumstances in which we can approach perfect virtue and maintain the virtue we have achieved.

In an ethical community, people are united by public laws of virtue that cannot be externally coerced by other people because they require the adoption of maxims and ends.⁶⁰ We must therefore figuratively suppose that someone else exercises constraint in an ethical community by representing it as a sort of religious family under divine laws.⁶¹ In order for us to develop actual ethical communities that approach this ideal, human beings need to establish traditions, rituals and institutions that bind them together against their unsociable inclinations.⁶²

⁵⁶ MM 458-60, 465-6; R 6:93-4, 97; CJ 5:432-3; A 7:270-3; LP 9:492.

⁵⁷ R 6:94; 97. See also R 6:93-8.

⁵⁸ R 6:94. See also R 6:94-6, 97-8, 122-4

⁵⁹ R 6:97. See also R 6:95-8.

⁶⁰ R 6:95, 101-8.

⁶¹ R 6:98-100, 102.

⁶² R 6:101-4, 151-2

The role of moral rules in a virtuous life

Although in Kant's ethics nothing is more important than cultivating and living in accordance with virtue, his theory is often mistakenly taken to be a paradigm of a "law conception of ethics," one that is exclusively concerned with overriding duties and obligations, that provides a comprehensive system of impartial, exceptionless and universally applicable moral principles, and that gives an algorithmic decision procedure anyone can use for generating and applying those rules.⁶³

Undeniably, Kant aimed to find or construct a framework for making objective moral judgments that is rooted in our nature as rational beings and that enables everyone to reach free and reasoned agreement in our moral judgments on the basis of mutually recognized principles and evidence. Across his ethical writings, he describes a complicated moral structure that consists of various levels, distinctions and application procedures. Rather than applying the Categorical Imperative directly to everyday contexts, Kant claims that "principles of application" are needed "to *show* in [human nature] what can be inferred from universal moral principles."⁶⁴ The two most basic principles of application, which are supposed to express different aspects of the Categorical Imperative as it applies to human beings in the natural world, are the Universal Principle of Right and the Supreme Principle of the Doctrine of Virtue.⁶⁵

⁶³ Anscombe, G. E. M. (1958), 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy*, 33 (124), 1-19, Williams, Bernard (1985), 'Morality, the Peculiar Institution', *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 174-97. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, McDowell, *Mind and World*, , Slote, Michael A. (1992), *From Morality to Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press), Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*.

⁶⁴ MM 6:216-17.

⁶⁵ MM 6:230, 395.

These principles in turn generate more specific duties of right as well as duties of ethics and virtue.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, Kant shares some of the concerns that virtue ethicists have raised about the proper role of moral principles in a virtuous life. In Kant's system, moral principles vary in how precisely they specify the actions that are required or forbidden. Although narrow and perfect duties require or forbid very specific actions, wide and imperfect duties leave significant latitude in deciding how to fulfill them.⁶⁷ For example, Kant thinks the duty not to lie is narrow and perfect because it precisely defines a kind of action we may not perform while the duty of beneficence is wide and imperfect because it requires us to set the happiness of others as one of our ends without specifying exactly how much help and assistance we must provide. Kant is also skeptical of pedantry and purism with regard to the fulfillment of wide duties, which should not be treated as if they were narrow duties.⁶⁸ He chastises the "fantastically virtuous" who allow "*nothing to be morally indifferent*" and who "turn the government of virtue into tyranny."⁶⁹ Kant wants to avoid the "tyranny of popular mores," he cautions against a "mania for spying on the morals of others" and he argues that many moral principles cannot be coercively enforced by others because they govern our internal commitments, goals and aspirations.⁷⁰

Moral principles and duties, according to Kant, establish a limited and loose framework of thought for agents who must rely on their powers of deliberation, judgment

⁶⁶ MM 6:218-20, 239, 381.

⁶⁷ MM 6:389-91, 446.

⁶⁸ MM 6:426, 437.

⁶⁹ MM 6:409 (Kant's italics).

⁷⁰ MM 6:239, 381, 464, 466.

and conscience to determine what they ought to do in concrete cases.⁷¹ We are morally required to develop these moral powers, gather relevant facts, understand what duties are at stake in given cases, take due-care in our deliberations, and scrutinize our own motives.⁷²

Kant emphasizes that *ethical duties* are “of wide obligation.”⁷³ Principles that require us to set ends or adopt ideals do not specify exactly what we must do with regard to them. And for those moral principles that require the adoption of maxims, “one can always ask for yet another principle for applying this maxim to cases that may arise”, so judgment is needed to determine how to satisfy such principles.⁷⁴ Kant’s discussions of ethical duties of both kinds often emphasize the ways that certain ends, ideals and maxims are indeterminate, epistemically inaccessible or characterized by thick moral concepts.⁷⁵

The *duties of right* that Kant presents, by contrast, do seem to invite the charges of rigorism that virtue ethicists aim to avoid. The Universal Principle of Right, Kant says, aims for “mathematical exactitude” in specifying reciprocal relations of equal freedom under universal laws.⁷⁶ Kant argues, however, that there is significant room for indeterminacy and disagreement in judgments of right or wrong even among conscientious and reasonable people.⁷⁷ The general problem is that “though laws must be meticulously observed, they cannot, after all, have regard to every little circumstance, and

⁷¹ CPR A133/B172.

⁷² MM 6:216, 441, 444-48; R 6:184-7.

⁷³ MM 6:390.

⁷⁴ MM 6:411.

⁷⁵ MM 6:392-3, 422, 426, 428, 454, 467, 472; CB 8:121, PP 8: 363, 365-6; G 4:418.

⁷⁶ MM 6:233. See also MM 6:411.

⁷⁷ MM 6:238, 257.

the latter may yield exceptions, which do not always find their exact resolution in the laws.”⁷⁸ A virtuous person must rely on her powers of judgment to interpret and apply her duties of right as well as her ethical duties.

Judgments of right and wrong sometimes require the application of thick moral concepts, such as equity and fairness, that Kant treats as concepts of right that cannot be fully specified by moral principles.⁷⁹ For example, how, as a matter of right, should the profits of a company be distributed when its founders originally agreed to share them equally, but one of the partners contributed significantly more to its success than the others?⁸⁰ Other cases involve contracts that are not explicit enough to easily determine what is right and wrong. If I promise a charity to donate a sum of money to them, but later regret my decision and refuse to send the funds, does the charity have the right to force me to pay up?⁸¹ And some cases of right or wrong involve apparent conflicts of rights. If I purchase a horse in a public market in accordance with public ordinances without knowing that it was stolen, it seems that both I and the original owner have a right to the horse.⁸²

When we encounter controversial cases of right and wrong, Kant claims that each of us must use our own reason, judgment and conscience to ascertain the relevant facts and determine as best we can what is right or wrong “in itself.”⁸³ These deliberations, in some cases, must be guided by our best guesses about what the parties to a contract most likely intended to do in making it. Also our deliberations about right and wrong should

⁷⁸ V 27:574. See also CPR A133/B172.

⁷⁹ MM 6:234-5; V 27:433, 532-3.

⁸⁰ MM 6:234.

⁸¹ MM 6:297-8.

⁸² MM 6:300-3.

⁸³ MM 6:297. See also MM 6:230, 235-6, 297, 301-2.

avoid concerns about the feasibility of a system property rights. For instance, our judgments about who owns stolen property that was purchased in good faith should not be influenced by the fact that it is often impractical for people to fully investigate titles before the time of purchase.⁸⁴

According to Kant, applying the Universal Principle of Right, especially in controversial cases, can be very difficult, if not impossible. He acknowledges that these difficulties can result in disagreements about right and wrong, even among conscientious people who are using their best judgment.⁸⁵ Yet, in Kant's view, rights necessarily involve an authorization to coerce others. If everyone were allowed to unilaterally follow his or her own best judgment about what "*what seems right and good*" without being "dependent upon another's opinion about this" then they could be authorized to coerce one another in ways that are inconsistent with the equal freedom of all.⁸⁶ This is one of Kant's main arguments for why we must join together in a public legal order in which judges are given the rightful authority to settle disputes about rights.⁸⁷ Our rights and duties, which are often in themselves indeterminate and subject to interpretation, are given an artificial specificity in a "rightful condition" that is necessary in order to determine and secure the equal freedom of all.⁸⁸

In order to serve this public role, Kant claims that judges should be guided by additional principles of right.⁸⁹ They should make judgments only on the basis of what is

⁸⁴ MM 6:301.

⁸⁵ MM 6:312.

⁸⁶ MM 6:312.

⁸⁷ MM 6:307, 311-313.

⁸⁸ MM 6:312.

⁸⁹ MM 6:297, 303.

most certain and clear because otherwise their task would be too difficult or impossible.⁹⁰ Judges, according to Kant, may also take account of the conditions that must be satisfied in order for a feasible system of property transfer to exist by, for example, not requiring buyers to fully establish the titles of the goods they purchase.⁹¹ And because equity and fairness are indeterminate concepts of right, judges should not take them into account at all in settling disputes about rights.⁹²

In sum, moral principles and rules of various kinds play an essential role in the life of a virtuous person. She is committed to these standards as fully regulative in her life, but she must carefully exercise her powers of judgment to interpret and apply them to specific cases. She also recognizes the need for a minimally decent legal framework of enforced public laws, which she obeys except when legal orders “conflict with inner morality.”⁹³

Conclusion

Human agents, according to Kant, owe it to ourselves to strive for perfect virtue by fully committing ourselves to morality and by developing the fortitude to maintain and execute this life-governing policy despite obstacles we may face. Although Kant thinks that we can never achieve perfect virtue because of the inherent “*frailty (fragilitas)* of human nature,” our journey of moral self-improvement nonetheless requires communities of good persons, a precise system of legally enforced rules as well as indeterminate moral principles that we must interpret and apply with care and good judgment. Exemplars and cultivated good feelings can also be useful aids along the way, but Kant warns us against

⁹⁰ MM 6:298-30; 303.

⁹¹ MM 6:301-3.

⁹² MM 6:234.

⁹³ MM 6:371. See also MM 6:322.

attempting to derive our moral standards themselves from examples or feelings. The best any of us can hope for, in Kant's view, is to make constant progress in our difficult struggle for moral perfection.

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