



Kant's Human Being

ESSAYS ON HIS THEORY OF HUMAN NATURE

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Introduction



“WHAT IS THE HUMAN BEING?”

KANT ASSERTS IN three different texts that the question “What is the human being?” is the most fundamental question in philosophy, one that encompasses all others (*Logik* 9: 25; cf. letter to Stäudlin of May 4, 1793, 11: 429; *Pölitz* 28: 533–34).¹ And he adds that the question is “answered by . . . *anthropology*” (9: 25), a subject on which he lectured annually beginning in 1772 and continuing up to his retirement from teaching in 1796. In 1798 he published *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, a work that he modestly describes as “the present manual for my anthropology course” in a footnote at the end of the preface (7: 122n). So this particular text is the most obvious place to look for Kant’s own answer to the question “What is the human being?” However, Kant’s views about anthropology were far from static. Over the years, many different student and auditor transcriptions from his twenty-four-year cycle of classroom lectures on anthropology have also been published. The most substantial and authoritative collection of these lectures is in volume 25 of the German Academy edition of *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, translated excerpts of which are also included in a volume in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.²

But finding Kant’s answer to the question “What is the human being?” is not simply a matter of attending to his numerous lectures on anthropology, for several reasons. For instance, the anthropology lectures themselves are partly an outgrowth of his lectures on physical geography, which date back to 1756 and which Kant also revised regularly until his retirement from teaching in 1796.³ In the introduction to the best-known version of these lectures, edited and published by his former student Friedrich Theodor

Rink in 1802, Kant describes geography and anthropology as two interconnected parts of a greater whole: “Experiences of *nature* and of the *human being* together make up *knowledge of the world*. We are taught *knowledge of the human being* by *anthropology*; we owe our *knowledge of nature* to *physical geography* or *description of the earth*” (9: 157; see also *Racen* 2: 443).

Kant’s essays on the philosophy of history, written in the mid-1780s, comprise yet another important source for his answer to the question “What is the human being?” Kant holds that human beings (like other living creatures, and unlike machines) must be studied teleologically in terms of their natural purposes. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), he writes:

an organized being is . . . not a mere machine, for that has only a *motive* power, while the organized being possess[es] in itself a *formative* power, and indeed one that it communicates to the matter, which does not have it (it organizes the latter): thus it has a self-propagating formative power, which cannot be explained through the capacity for movement alone (that is, mechanism).

(5: 374, see also 398)

Strictly speaking, in Kant’s view this assumption of natural purpose should be understood only as a heuristic device, but it is one that strongly influences his reflections on both history and human beings. A substantial portion of his answer to the question “What is the human being?” is concerned with what he calls the *Bestimmung* (vocation, destiny) of the human species. Our *Bestimmung* differs from that of other terrestrial creatures. And this future orientation or focus on where we as a species are headed is also a prominent feature in his writings on history, all of which seek to “discover an *aim of nature* in this nonsensical course of things human” (*Idee* 8: 18).

Kant’s writings on education constitute another principal source for his answer to the question “What is the human being?” “The human being is the only creature that must be educated,” he announces in the opening sentence of his *Lectures on Pedagogy* (1803); “the human being can only become human through education” (9: 441, 443).⁴ Other creatures are able to use their natural predispositions more or less instinctively; we alone require extensive help from others in order to employ ours effectively.

But while geography, history, education, and above all anthropology are certainly among the most significant Kantian sources for locating his answer to the question “What is the human being?” his remarks in these four groups of texts by no means constitute his complete answer. Reflection on human nature is the most pervasive and persistent theme in all of Kant’s writings, and as a result it is no exaggeration to say that *all* of his works are relevant to this question. But as we will see shortly, it is also no exaggeration to say that Kant’s answer to the question “What is the human being?” ultimately remains somewhat tentative. He offers no complete or final answer to the question, because he does not think that it is possible to do so.

RUDIMENTS OF KANT'S THEORY OF HUMAN NATURE

Each of the essays in this volume deals with one or another specific aspect of Kant's theory of human nature. Before proceeding, readers may find it helpful to first orient themselves by surveying the broader outlines of his account of human nature, and noting how his account differs from competing views. As Kant puts it, "he who wants to derive benefit from his journey must draw up a plan in advance" (*Geo* 9: 157). Without some preparatory orientation, any knowledge gained from a journey is likely to "yield nothing more than fragmentary groping around and no science" (*Anth* 7: 120).

First, Kant definitely subscribes to the view that there is a human nature—a set of common characteristics shared by all normal members of the human species in different times and places. This core commitment puts him in opposition to those who, like Sartre, assert that "there is no human nature. . . . Man is nothing but that which he makes of himself."⁵ However, as we will see later, the distance between Kant and Sartre on this particular point is not as great as Sartre implies. In their reflections on human beings, both thinkers place a strong emphasis on our capacity for free choice. On Kant's account as well as Sartre's, man "has a character, which he himself creates [*den er sich selbst schafft*]" (*Anth* 7: 321), and Kant specifically differentiates his own pragmatic anthropology from competing "physiological" ones that view human beings as causally determined entities when he states that pragmatic anthropology concerns the investigation of what the human being "as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself" (7: 119).

Kant's commitment to the existence of a human nature also puts him in opposition to historicists, such as Foucault, who hold that "man is an invention of recent date."⁶ On Kant's view, human beings have existed for a very long time. Nevertheless, his theory of human nature is certainly not ahistorical. He acknowledges that human life has changed profoundly over the course of centuries, but he also holds that a correct account of human nature is one that includes the conceptual resources to enable us to understand why change has occurred.

Insofar as Kant subscribes to "a context-independent concept of 'Human Nature,'" he is also at odds with "the relativist bent" that is "in some sense implicit in the field [of post-Kantian anthropology] as such."⁷ Anthropology as Kant conceives it should be "general" rather than "local": "In it one comes to know not the state of human beings but rather the nature of humanity, for the local properties of human beings always change, but the nature of humanity does not. . . . Anthropology is not a description of human beings, but of human nature" (*Friedländer* 25: 471).⁸

Humans and Nonterrestrial Rational Beings. While Kant is firmly convinced both that there is a human nature and that it is anthropology's job to inform us about this nature, he also believes—somewhat paradoxically—that it is impossible to state definitively what this nature consists in. His main reason for holding the latter view is that in order to know what (if anything) is unique to our species we would need to compare ourselves with other species of rational beings, and we humans have not

(yet) encountered any nonhuman rational beings. As he states toward the end of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*:

It seems therefore that the problem of indicating the character of the human species is absolutely insoluble [*schlechterdings unauf löslich*], because the solution would have to be made through experience by means of the comparison of two *species* of rational being, but experience does not offer us this.

(7: 321)

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant states confidently that he is “ready to bet everything [*alles*]” (A 825/B 853) he has in defense of the proposition that intelligent life does exist on other planets, and in his early work *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755) he announces that “most of the planets are certainly inhabited [*gewiß bewohnt*]” (1: 354) and that “human nature . . . occupies exactly the middle rung” on the ladder between “the most sublime classes of rational creatures,” who inhabit Jupiter and Saturn, and the less intelligent ones, who live on Venus and Mercury (1: 359). So it is clear that Kant, like “many eminent philosophers—among others Aristotle, Nicolas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno, Gassendi, Locke, Lambert, . . . and William Whewell—believed that there is extraterrestrial life.”⁹ But in his more empirically sober anthropological writings he acknowledges that we have no reliable evidence for this claim. Nevertheless, the fact that Kant clearly does believe in intelligent extraterrestrial life also indicates that he does not subscribe to “the fantasy of human exceptionalism,”¹⁰ a fantasy allegedly fueled by our own narcissism. Kant is not in humanist despair over giving up “the specialness of being human”¹¹ because he does not think we humans know for sure that we are special. There may be others out there like us.

At one point Kant briefly compares humans with “the idea of possible rational beings on earth in general,” conjecturing that what distinguishes the human species is “that nature has planted in it the seed [*Keime*] of *discord*, and has willed that its own reason bring *concord* out of this, or at least a constant approximation” (*Anth* 7: 322, see also 331). This is an allusion to what he elsewhere refers to as humanity’s “unsociable sociability” (*Idee* 8: 20)—our bidirectional propensity both to associate with others (sociability) and to compete and fight against each other (unsociability). Kant seems to think that the implanted seed of discord distinguishes humans from other rational beings, but (again) strictly speaking this is speculation on his part. There may also be other rational beings that relate to each other in a similar manner.

Humans and Terrestrial Beings. A definitive statement concerning what is unique about human nature is not possible, in part because we lack empirical evidence of the specific natures of other rational beings. But we can at least compare humans to other terrestrial beings, noting their similarities and differences. Broadly speaking, Kant’s comparison of humans to animals is naturalistic and biologically based. Indeed, I am not sure that he would quarrel with E. O. Wilson’s pronouncement (issued as a challenge to traditional humanists and social scientists) that “biology is the key to human nature, and social scientists cannot afford to ignore its rapidly tightening principles”¹²—with

the caveat that Kant's biology is fundamentally different from Wilson's. Kantian biology is teleological and (when applied to human beings) carries a strong presumption of free choice, whereas Wilson's is mechanistic and deterministic throughout.¹³ Also (in part as a result of the former), while Wilson and other contemporary biology-oriented theorists of human nature tend to see only continuities between humans and other animals,¹⁴ Kant does see some fundamental discontinuities. Kant is primarily interested in what human beings can make of themselves, given their natural predispositions (*Anlagen*). On his view, the nature of each species is explainable by reference to its own unique set of predispositions. As he notes in *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy* (1788): "I myself derive all organization from *organic beings* (through generation) and all later forms (of this kind of natural things) from laws of the gradual development of *original predispositions* [*ursprüngliche Anlagen*], which were to be found in the organization of its phylum" (8: 179). Kantian *Anlagen* are inheritable tendencies passed on to each individual member of a species through reproduction.

In comparing humans to other animals, Kant sees the following basic differences:

Rationality. Humans, he believes, are the only rational terrestrial beings. But two points about his ascription of rationality to humans are worth noting. First, he puts a slight twist on the traditional definition of man as an *animal rationale*. The human being, on Kant's view, is "an animal endowed with the capacity of reason (*animal rationale*)," and thus "can make out of himself [*aus sich selbst . . . machen kann*] a *rational animal* (*animal rationale*)" (*Anth* 7: 321). Humans have the ability to become rational animals if they exercise their capacities appropriately, but they are not automatically or necessarily rational. As Allen Wood notes: "Human beings are capable of directing their lives rationally, but it is not especially characteristic of them to exercise this capacity successfully. Rather, rationality must be viewed as a *problem* set for human beings by their nature."¹⁵ In characterizing human beings' relationship to rationality in this more qualified manner, Kant adds a further tentative note to his account of human nature. Humans are not inherently rational, but they have the capacity to become rational. And some of us may succeed more than others. Second, what Kant means by "rationality" in this context is not instrumental rationality (choosing efficient means toward goals or ends that one desires) but substantive rationality (deliberating about and freely determining one's ends). An animal that strategizes about how to satisfy its hunger exhibits instrumental rationality; an animal that reflects on and then renounces its hunger (say, in protest over an injustice) exhibits substantive rationality. Kant grants that animals have instrumental rationality—like humans, "animals also act in accordance with *representations* (and are not, as Descartes would have it, machines)" (*KU* 5: 464n; cf. *Pölitz* 28: 274). Animals have desires, and many of them think about how to realize their desires. But Kant also holds that only humans—at least among the class of terrestrial beings—have substantive rationality: "in order to assign the human being his class in the system of animal nature, nothing remains for us than to say that he has a character, which he himself creates, insofar as he is capable of perfecting himself according to ends that he himself adopts" (*Anth* 7: 321). In emphasizing human beings' capacity to pursue ends of their own choosing (substantive rationality), Kant

adds yet another tentative note to his account of human nature. Because humans can freely choose their own ends rather than simply pursue the goals that they instinctively desire, their mode of life is radically indeterminate—open rather than fixed.

Freedom. Closely related to Kant's ascription of substantive rationality to humans is his position on human freedom. On his account, a crucial turning point in human development occurred when our distant ancestors first became aware of their capacity to make free choices. At some point in the distant past, the human being "discovered in himself a faculty of choosing for himself a way of living and not being bound to a single one, as other animals are." At this juncture the human being "stood, as it were, on the brink of an abyss; for instead of the single objects of his desire to which instinct had up to now directed him, there opened up an infinity of them" (*Anfang* 8: 112). Here as well, indeterminacy is injected into his account of human nature. Like the great Renaissance humanist philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Kant views human beings as chameleons—creatures with a self-transforming nature who, in virtue of their capacity of free choice, can fashion themselves in whatever shapes they may prefer.¹⁶

Culture, Civilization, Morality. Human beings' interrelated capacities to determine their own ends and to make free choices among equally compelling alternatives in turn contribute to several additional differences between humans and other animals. In his famous summary of pragmatic anthropology "in respect to the vocation [*Bestimmung*] of the human being and the characteristic of his formation," Kant writes: "The human being is destined by his reason [*durch seine Vernunft bestimmt*] to live in a society with human beings and in it to cultivate himself, to civilize himself, and to moralize himself by means of the arts and sciences" (*Anth* 7: 324). Kant has been repeatedly challenged on two of these claims (viz., culture and morality), but once the competing definitions of "culture" and "morality" employed by each side are factored into the dispute, it is far from clear that he has been refuted.

For instance, in a frequently cited article entitled "Cultures in Chimpanzees" published in *Nature* in 1999, the nine co-authors describe "39 different behavior patterns, including tool usage, grooming, and courtship behaviours [that] are customary or habitual in some [chimpanzee] communities but are absent in others where ecological explanations have been discounted,"¹⁷ all of which in their view provide ample support for the claim that chimpanzees have culture. A few weeks after the article appeared, Stephen Jay Gould published an op-ed column in the *New York Times*, asserting that the study "published in . . . *Nature* proves the existence of complex cultures in chimpanzees," and that one more "favored candidate for a 'golden barrier' to separate humans from animals" had been decisively refuted.¹⁸ Kant, while explicitly acknowledging that the chimpanzee "has many similarities with the human being" (*Geo* 9: 337; cf. *Holstein* 26: 126), also defines "culture" tersely as "the production of the aptitude of a rational being for ends in general (thus those of his freedom)" (*KU* 5: 431). According to this definition, only creatures that have the capacity to set ends for themselves and to freely choose from among these ends can be said to have culture. By contrast, the conception of culture employed by the authors of the article in *Nature* is a minimalist one that makes no reference to substantive rationality or free choice. Rather, "a cultural behaviour is one that is transmitted repeatedly

through social or observational learning to become a population-level characteristic.”¹⁹ According to the latter definition, any behavior that is not merely instinctual or caused by external environmental factors counts as cultural, while on Kant’s view it counts as cultural only if (in addition to not being merely instinctual or ecological) it involves (at least at its inception) both substantive rationality and free choice. One prominent example discussed by both parties in this dispute is dialects in songbirds. Because these phenomena are maintained by “social transmission mechanisms,” they count as cultural according to the definition employed in the *Nature* article. Kant readily agrees with the nine co-authors and allows that such birds “do not sing by instinct, but actually learn [*wirklich lernen*]” (*Päd* 9: 443) to do so from their parents. One bird imparts the song to another “through instruction [*durch Belehrung*] (like a tradition)” (*Anth* 7: 323n). Nevertheless, such behavior does not count as cultural according to his definition, since it occurs in the absence of substantive rationality and free choice.²⁰

An additional fundamental disagreement concerning what counts as cultural is that culture on Kant’s view is cumulative or progressive, whereas the minimalist definitions of culture favored by primatologists make no reference to this feature. On Kant’s view, nature’s plan is “to bring about the perfection of the human being through progressive culture” (*Anth* 7: 322). In order to carry out this plan, nature “needs an immense series of generations, each of which transmits its enlightenment to the next, in order finally to propel its germs in our species to that stage of development which is completely suited to its aim” (*Idee* 8: 19). Culture in Kant’s sense is not merely behavior that is transmitted via social mechanisms, but substantively rational and freely chosen activity that can be improved upon by later generations. And here he sees another clear difference between humans and other animals:

[W]ith all other animals left to themselves, each individual reaches its complete destiny [seine ganze Bestimmung erreicht]; however, with the human being only the species, at best, reaches it; so that the human race can work its way up to its destiny only through progress in a series of innumerable many generations.

(*Anth* 7: 324, cf. 329; *Menschenkunde* 25: 1196; *Mrongovius* 25: 1417)

The claim that culture is cumulative is most frequently associated with Michael Tomasello’s idea of “the ratchet effect.” On Tomasello’s view, while we do find some components of culture present among nonhuman animals, the crucial ratchet effect is absent:

Many nonhuman primate individuals regularly produce intelligent behavioral innovations and novelties, but then their group mates do not engage in the kinds of social learning that would enable, over time, the cultural ratchet to do its work. . . . The basic fact is thus that human beings are able to pool their cognitive resources in ways that animal species are not.²¹

Insofar as Tomasello sees no evidence of cumulative culture in nonhuman animal social life, his position is quite Kantian. But it should also be noted that his notion of

the ratchet effect contains far stronger assumptions than Kant's Enlightenment idea of cultural progress. The internal machinery of a ratchet is designed to allow motion only in an upward direction. When we carry this part of Tomasello's metaphor over to culture, the implication is that human cultural progress is both unilinear and causally determined. But on Kant's view, humans are by no means causally determined to achieve unilinear cultural progress. Rather, we pursue cultural progress as free beings who can and do change our minds. Therefore, both cultural regress and nonlinear cultural change are always possibilities. As he notes in the *Conflict of the Faculties* (1798):

[N]o one can guarantee that now, this very moment, with regard to the physical disposition of our species, the epoch of its decline would not be liable to occur. . . . For we are dealing with beings that act freely, to whom, it is true, what they *ought* to do may be *dictated* in advance, but of whom it may not be *predicted* what they *will* do.

(7: 83)

When Kant's strong underlying commitment to human freedom is kept in mind, the resulting picture is that culture on his view is a product of rational agency that is potentially (but not necessarily) cumulative.

Kant's attribution of a predisposition to morality in the human species (and his denial that we find this predisposition in other animal species) has also been repeatedly challenged by Darwinian theorists of human nature. But here as well, once one takes into account the competing definitions of "morality" employed by each side in the debate, the actual extent of the disagreement may be smaller than first assumed.

Those who hold that nonhuman animals have morality typically define "morality" as "a suite of interrelated other-regarding behaviors that cultivate and regulate complex interactions within social groups. . . . Morality is an essentially social phenomenon."²² According to this conception, morality is a group-oriented phenomenon born out of mutual dependence that is exclusively other-regarding. As Frans de Waal writes: "A solitary person would have no need for morality, nor would a person who lives with others without mutual dependency."²³ In addition to this exclusively other-regarding focus, a second core assumption in the moral conceptions of those who attribute morality to nonhuman animals is that morality is primarily concerned with instincts and emotions rather than rationality and principles. Morality is "a direct outgrowth of the social instincts that we share with other animals. . . . [It] is neither unique to us nor a conscious decision taken at a specific point in time: it is the product of social evolution."²⁴

Kant would not deny that other-regarding instincts (e.g., helping and caring behavior, empathy, and benevolence) are important building blocks for morality. But when he attributes a moral predisposition to the human being and denies that one is present in other living inhabitants of the earth, he refers not to these phenomena but rather to "a being endowed with the power of practical reason and consciousness of freedom of his power of choice" (*Anth* 7: 324). The realization on our distant ancestors' part that they possessed these specific capacities for "normative self-government"²⁵ is what marks the real beginning of morality on Kant's view—a beginning that marks a

break rather than a continuity between humans and other animals. *When* exactly this happened seems fated to remain a matter of conjecture, but its occurrence marked a decisive turning point in human history (see also *Idee* 8: 112).

In his *Anthropology* and elsewhere, Kant also briefly discusses what he believes are several additional differences between humans and other animal species, which I turn to now. However, I believe the following alleged differences are best viewed as corollaries of the core capacities of rationality and free choice and/or as alternative ways of describing the other human predispositions discussed above.

Preservation, Education, Governance. For instance, after contrasting human beings' capacity to become rational beings with the lack of this capacity in other inhabitants of the earth, Kant distinguishes three tasks of human reason (*Anth* 7: 321–22). The first task, preservation, concerns the art of survival. Other terrestrial animals seem to master this art by instinct, but human beings “must invent their own relationship to nature, and Kant is struck by the wide variety of such relationships human beings have adopted in different climates and situations on the earth’s surface.”²⁶ In pursuing the art of survival, human beings also exercise their capacities of reason and freedom. Reason’s second task is education. As noted earlier, Kant is convinced that (at least among the living inhabitants of the earth) “the human being is the only creature that must be educated” (*Päd* 9: 441). The radical indeterminacy of our nature entails the necessity of education. In order to develop our predispositions appropriately, we need extensive and prolonged help from others. However, culture (see above) and education for Kant are overlapping tasks. In his *Lectures on Pedagogy* he states: “The human being must be *cultivated*. Culture includes instruction and teaching. It is the procurement of skillfulness. The latter is the possession of a faculty which is sufficient for the carrying out of whatever purpose” (9: 449, see also 441). Third, in virtue of their capacity for reason, humans also have the task of governing themselves “as a systematic whole (arranged according to principles of reason)” (*Anth* 7: 322). Here there is a parallel to Aristotle: “the human being is by nature a political animal,” and it is in virtue of his capacity for *logos* that he is a political animal (*Politics* I.2 1253a2–3, 9–10). But for Aristotle the ideal size of a human political entity is a *polis* that is not too small to be self-sufficient but also not too large to be “readily surveyable” (VII.4 1326b24)—perhaps 5,000–10,000 citizens. For “it is difficult—perhaps impossible—for a city that is too populous [*lian poluanthrōpon*] to be well governed” (VII.4 1326a26–27). Kant, on the other hand, like many other Enlightenment intellectuals, supports a version of the *cosmopolis* (in his case, a worldwide federation of sovereign states dedicated to peace). For instance, in the final sentence of the *Anthropology*, he expresses his hope for an eventual “progressive organization of citizens of the earth” into a system that is “cosmopolitically united” (7: 333; cf. *Frieden* 8: 341–86).

Technical, Pragmatic, and Moral Predispositions. Similarly, a bit later in the *Anthropology* Kant declares that human beings are “markedly distinguished [*kenntlich unterschieden*]” from all other inhabitants of the earth by their technical, pragmatic, and moral predispositions (7: 322). By “technical predisposition” Kant refers to our ability to devise appropriate means to achieve our freely chosen ends, and so this predisposition overlaps somewhat with our earlier discussions of rationality and culture. But here

Kant also draws special attention to the remarkable dexterity of human hands and fingers as a concrete expression of our freedom: “by this means nature has made the human being not suited for one way of manipulating things but underdetermined for every way [*unbestimmt für alle*], consequently suited for the use of reason” (7: 323). The pragmatic disposition occupies a special place in Kant’s account of human nature, given his own advocacy of an anthropology conducted “from a pragmatic point of view.”²⁷ But in his discussion of this predisposition toward the end of the *Anthropology*, he stresses that it refers to the human being’s capacity “to use other human beings skillfully for his purposes” and “to become civilized through culture” (7: 322, 323). And so it overlaps with the human capacities for civilization and culture discussed earlier. The human species’ moral predisposition was also discussed earlier.

Humanity, Personality. Finally, in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) Kant briefly discusses two additional predispositions that he believes are present in humans and absent in other terrestrial animal species—humanity and personality. Some commentators argue that the predisposition to humanity described in *Religion* is identical to the pragmatic predisposition discussed in the *Anthropology*; others hold that it encompasses both the pragmatic and technical predispositions.²⁸ My own view is that the *Religion* and *Anthropology* accounts of the human species’ predispositions stand in an ambiguous relationship with one another. In *Religion* Kant describes the predisposition to humanity as a capacity that the human being has “as a living and at the same time *rational* being” (6: 26), and the key reference to “rational” suggests that what he primarily has in mind here is the human being’s ability to deliberate about, and to freely choose, his own ends. In describing the predisposition to personality in *Religion* he says that it is a quality the human being has “as a rational and at the same time *responsible* being” (6: 26). So the discussion here presupposes the capacities for rationality, freedom, and morality discussed earlier.

The above list of (what Kant believes to be) distinctive human features is not intended to be exhaustive,²⁹ but it does include his major commitments and should serve as a useful outline and orientation for approaching the essays in this volume. We can summarize the main points in the above discussion by noting that Kant’s theory of human nature is provisional in both its conception and presentation; that his commitment to the possibility of rational life on other planets means that he is not a defender of human exceptionalism; that he believes there is a uniform human nature but that its core feature of free choice means that humanity’s nature is marked by radical indeterminacy; that his conception of human nature, while neither historicist nor relativist, also emphasizes historical development and cultural variation; and that he believes a systematic and comparative biological examination of human and other terrestrial animal species reveals both continuities and profound differences.

Virtues, Anthropology, and Beyond

As noted earlier, all of the essays in this volume, with one exception, were written after my book *Kant’s Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings* (2000). The

exception is chapter 1 (“Kant’s Virtue Ethics”), one of my first publications (1986), and still one of my most successful Kant essays. In looking back, I can see now that my early work on the neglected role of virtue in Kant’s ethics was largely responsible for leading me into later investigations into Kant’s theory of human nature. But this perceived connection between virtue and human nature is not merely a hope on my own part to find “a guiding thread for exhibiting an otherwise planless *aggregate*” (*Idee* 8: 29) of essays as a systematic whole. On Kant’s view, “all the moral perfection that a human being can attain is still only virtue” (*KpV* 5: 128, see also 84; *MdS* 6: 383). In other words, his particular theory of virtue is in effect a theory of morality designed to fit (what he believes are) the specific conditions of human beings (as opposed to the conditions of other types of rational beings). Kant arrives at his theory of virtue only after first settling on the parameters of his theory of human nature.

At the suggestion of one of the external readers of this manuscript selected by Oxford University Press, I have added a new prefatory note (marked by an asterisk) to each of the essays, explaining how it arose, what major themes it addresses, and how it fits in with the other essays in the volume. Readers who desire more specific information of this sort are encouraged to consult these new notes.

The essays are organized into three different groups, and in closing I would like to say a few words about the book’s tripartite structure.

Human Virtues. Part I consists of four essays, each dealing with different aspects of the nature and role of virtue in Kant’s normative ethical theory. For many years I have argued that virtue occupies a greater space within Kant’s ethics than is commonly acknowledged. But as I learned more about his theory of human nature, I also began to realize that some of his views about human beings were at variance with other conceptions of human nature (particularly Aristotelian) that more typically influence both classical and contemporary virtue ethics programs. For instance (and this is perhaps the most prominent example), Kant believes there exists a universal propensity to evil within human nature; Aristotelian virtue ethicists clearly do not. The result, or so I argue, is a virtue ethics, but one that differs in certain fundamental ways from the more familiar virtue ethics projects. Viewed as a whole, the essays in part I track my ongoing efforts both to make sense of the very idea of a Kantian virtue ethics as well as to show how it differs from other virtue ethics programs.

Anthropology and Ethics. The essays in part II of this collection represent the core of my work on Kant’s theory of human nature. I have always approached his myriad writings on human nature primarily from the perspective of a historically oriented ethical theorist who is concerned with how his account of human nature affects his ethics—rather than, say, that of a biologist, a practicing anthropologist, or a philosopher of science. That all of these approaches (and others) are legitimate, I do not deny. But I continue to believe that the moral dimension dominates all others. At bottom, Kant approaches the study of human nature from the perspective of a moralist (albeit an extremely philosophical moralist). “The sciences are *principia* for the improvement [*Verbesserung*] of morality” (*Collins Moralphilosophie* 27: 462), and this holds in particular for Kantian anthropology.³⁰ Scholars will continue to disagree about the overall plausibility and coherence of Kant’s ethics, the relationship between the pure and impure

parts of his ethics, and much more. But that the dominant message in his work on human nature is a moral one is, I believe, beyond dispute.

Extensions of Anthropology. The essays in the final part of the book all deal with aspects of Kant's theory of human nature that he presents and develops outside of his anthropology lectures—viz., in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, the essays and lectures on physical geography, the *Lectures on Pedagogy*, and the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. As noted earlier, in order to obtain Kant's full answer to the question "What is the human being?" one needs to go beyond his anthropology lectures. At the same time, these specific writings certainly do not exhaust Kant's work on human nature. (As also noted earlier, his writings on the philosophy of history are another important source, and ultimately *all* of Kant's writings have some relevance to the question "What is the human being?") My main reasons for including this third group of essays are that they concern important but often under-examined texts within the Kantian corpus that are beginning to attract increased scholarly attention; that they shed additional light on key issues within Kant's conception of human nature; and, last but not least, that they deal with Kantian texts that I have been continually drawn to over the years.

Among moral qualities true virtue alone is sublime.

—*Beob* 2: 215

For it is only by means of this idea [of virtue] that any judgment of moral worth or unworth is possible.

—*Krv* B 372

But everything good that is not based on a morally good disposition, is nothing but mere semblance and glittering misery.

—*Idee* 8: 26

1

Kant's Virtue Ethics*



IN THE LATE twentieth century and the early twenty-first, we have heard much about the revival of virtue ethics, of normative theories whose primary focus is on persons rather than on decision making in problematic situations, on agents and the sorts of lives they lead rather than on discrete acts and rules for making choices, on characters and their morally relevant traits rather than on laws of obligation. Contemporary theorists are often motivated by a sense of the impoverishment of modern moral traditions, for in placing primary weight on the agent rather than the act (much less the act's consequences), virtue theorists set themselves off against what are often viewed as *the* two options in modern ethics—utilitarianism and deontologism. The traditional whipping boy in the latter case is Kant, for he is widely regarded as deontology personified, the first moral theorist to place a nonderivative conception of duty at the center of the philosophical stage, the first to establish a nonconsequentialist decision procedure through his universalizability test, etc. In addition, virtue theorists also seem to have historical reasons for disapproving of Kant. For the rise of quandary ethics is often associated with Enlightenment efforts to escape from tradition and the pull of local communities, and a consequent yearning for an ahistorical and universalistic conception of morality. Kant, as spokesman for the Enlightenment, is a natural target of criticism here.

For conceptual as well as historical reasons then, Kantian ethics has suffered badly under the current revival-of-virtue campaign. Alasdair MacIntyre writes: "In Kant's moral writings we have reached a point at which the notion that morality is anything other than obedience to rules has almost, if not quite, disappeared from sight."¹

Philippa Foot chastises Kant as one of a select group of philosophers whose “tacitly accepted opinion was that a study of the topic [of the virtues and vices] would form no part of the fundamental work of ethics.”² On her view, Kant should bear a sizable part of the responsibility for analytic philosophy’s neglect of virtue. And Bernard Williams is equally critical in his insistent claims that Kantian moral theory treats persons in abstraction from character, and thus stands guilty of misrepresenting not only persons but morality and practical deliberation as well.³ The underlying message is not simply that Kant is an illustrative representative of the deontological rule ethics perspective, but that his ethics is the worst possible sort of deontological rule ethics, one which is primarily responsible for the eclipse of agent-centered ethics.

Yet some readers of Kant feel that the conceptual shape of his ethical theory has been distorted by defender and critic alike, that his ethics is not rule ethics but virtue ethics. This reading of Kant has had its defenders in the past (he did, after all, write *The Doctrine of Virtue*), but Onora O’Neill has placed it in the context of the contemporary virtue ethics debate. In “Kant after Virtue” (a reply to MacIntyre’s book), she states confidently that “what is not in doubt . . . is that Kant offers primarily an ethic of virtue rather than an ethic of rules.”⁴ So whose Kant is *the* Kant—hers or the more familiar one of MacIntyre & Co.?

The real Kant lies somewhere in between these two extremes. He sought to build an ethical theory which could assess both the life plans of moral agents and their discrete acts. This is to his credit, for an adequate moral theory needs to do both.

THE SHAPE OF VIRTUE ETHICS⁵

What qualifies an ethical theory as virtue ethics rather than rule ethics?

Agents versus Acts

One hallmark of virtue ethics is its strong agent orientation. For virtue theorists, the primary object of moral evaluation is not the intentional act or its consequences, but the agent. Utilitarians begin with a concept of the good—here defined with reference to states of affairs rather than persons. Duty, rights, and even virtue are all treated by utilitarians as derivative categories of secondary importance, definable in terms of utility maximization. Similarly, deontologists take duty as their irreducible starting point, and reject any attempt to define this root notion of being morally bound to do something in terms of good to be achieved. The good is now a derivative category, definable in terms of the right. The good that we are to promote is right action for its own sake—duty for duty’s sake. Virtue also is a derivative notion, definable in terms of pro-attitudes toward one’s duties. It is important, but only because it helps us to do our duty.

Virtue ethics begins with a notion of the morally good person, which is primitive in the sense that it is not defined in terms of performing obligatory acts (“the person who acts as duty requires”) or endstates (“the agent who is disposed to maximize utility

through his acts"). On the contrary, right and wrong acts are now construed in terms of what the good agent would or would not do, worthy and unworthy ends in terms of what the good agent would or would not aim at. It is by means of this conceptual shift that "being" rather than "doing" achieves prominence in virtue ethics.

Decision Procedures versus Good Character

Agent ethics and act ethics also diverge in their overall conceptions of practical reasoning. Act theorists, because they focus on discrete acts and moral quandaries, are interested in formulating decision procedures for making practical choices. Because these theorists have derivative and relatively weak conceptions of character to lean on, the agent in a practical choice situation does not appear to them to have many resources upon which to draw. He or she needs a guide—hopefully a decision procedure—for finding a way out of the quandary. Agent ethics, because it focuses on long-term characteristic patterns of action, downplays atomic acts and choice situations in the process. It is not as concerned with portraying practical reason as a rule-governed enterprise which can be applied on a case-by-case basis. Virtue theorists do not view moral choice as unreasoned or irrational; the virtuous agent is also seen as the practically wise agent. But one often finds divergent portraits of practical reason in act and agent ethics.

Motivation

A third general area where we are likely to see differences between agent and act ethics is in their respective views on moral motivation. This complex issue is particularly important in any reading of Kantian ethics as virtue ethics. For the duty-based or deontological theorist, the preferred motive is respect for the idea of duty itself, and the good man is the one who does his duty for duty's sake. This does not entail that the agent who does his duty for duty's sake does so grudgingly, or only in spite of inclinations to the contrary, but simply that the determining ground of the motive is respect for duty. For the goal-based or utilitarian theorist, the preferred motive is a steady disposition to maximize utility.

In virtue ethics the preferred motivation factor is not duty or utility but the virtues themselves. The agent who acts from dispositions of friendship, courage, or integrity is held in higher esteem than the person who performs the same acts from different motives. For instance, a virtue theorist might call a man courageous only if, when in danger, it was clear that the man did not even want to run away (and thus showed signs of being "directly moved" to act courageously), while the duty-based theorist would only call a man courageous if he did not run away out of a sense of duty (but perhaps wanted to anyway—though the "want" is here irrelevant). As the example suggests, matters become troublesome when we bring in reason and inclination. I have not said that one theory asserts we are motivated by reason, another by desire. However, reason and inclination do enter into the motivation issue (particularly in debates over Kant) in the following way. Virtue ethics, with its "virtue for virtue's sake" position on motivation,

is also committed to the claim that our natural inclinations play a necessary role in many types of action done from virtue. Acting from the virtue of friendship, for instance, would require that one possess and exhibit certain feelings about friends. Kant, on the other hand, holds (from the *Groundwork* on) that the sole determining ground of the will must be respect (*Achtung*)—a peculiarly non-empirical feeling produced by an intellectual awareness of the moral law. Kant thus appears to deny natural inclinations any positive role in moral motivation, whereas virtue ethics requires it.

VIRTUE AND THE GOOD WILL

Kant begins his ethical investigations with a powerful but cryptic proclamation about the good will: “It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a **good will**” (*Gr* 4: 393). From the perspective of virtue ethics, to what extent should Kant’s position on the good will be construed as evidence of an agent-centered rather than an act-centered ethics?

As Robert Paul Wolff remarks, it is “noteworthy that the philosopher most completely identified with the doctrine of stern duty should begin, not with a statement about what we ought to do, but rather with a judgment of what is unqualifiedly good.”⁶ And what is unqualifiedly good, according to Kant, is not an endstate such as pleasure or the performance of certain atomic acts in conformity to rules, but a state of character which becomes the basis for all of one’s actions. To answer the question “Is my will good?” (a question which can never be answered with certain knowledge, due to the opacity of our intentions), we must look beyond atomic acts and decisions and inquire into how we have lived. A human being cannot be “morally good in some parts, and at the same time evil in others” (*Rel* 6: 24). Similarly, he cannot, on Kant’s view, exhibit a good will one moment and an evil one the next. Steadfastness of character must be demonstrated.

So Kant’s opening claim concerning the unqualified goodness of the good will means that what is fundamentally important in his ethics is not acts but agents. But what is the relationship between good will and virtue? Kant defines virtue (*Tugend*) in the *Tugendlehre* as fortitude “with respect to what opposes the moral disposition *within us*” (*MdS* 6: 380). The Kantian virtuous agent is thus one who, because of his “fortitude,” is able to resist urges and inclinations that are opposed to moral law. Kantian fortitude is strength (*Stärke*) or force (*Kraft*) of will, not in the sense of being able to accomplish the goals one sets out to achieve, but rather in the sense of mastery over one’s inclinations and constancy of purpose.⁷

A good will is a will which steadily acts from the motive of respect for the moral law. But human beings, because they are natural beings, always possess inclinations which may lead them to act against reason. Their wills are thus in a perpetual state of tension. Some wills are better than others, but only a holy will (who has no wants that could run counter to reason, and who can thus do no evil) possesses an absolutely good will. This is why Kant holds that “human morality in its highest stage can still be nothing

more than virtue" (*MdS* 6: 383; cf. *KpV* 5: 84–85, *Gr* 4: 414). Virtue is only an approximation of the good will, because of the basic conflict or tension in human wills. Kant's virtuous agent is a human approximation of a good will who through strength of mind continually acts out of respect for the moral law while still feeling the presence of natural inclinations which could tempt him to act from other motives.

Now if virtue is the human approximation of the good will, and if the good will is the only unqualified good, this does imply that moral virtue, for Kant, is foundational, and not (as one would expect in a deontological theory) a concept of derivative or secondary importance. ["But everything good that is not grafted onto a morally good disposition, is nothing but mere semblance and glittering misery" (*Idee* 8: 26).] As Harbison notes: "the essence of [Kant's] moral philosophy is quite different from what it has commonly been supposed to be, for on the basis of this enquiry one must conclude that it is the concept of the good will that lies at its foundation."⁸

But there remains a fundamental problem for this particular argument in favor of a virtue ethics reading of Kant. Both the good will and virtue are defined in terms of obedience to moral law, for they are both wills which are in conformity to moral law and which act out of respect for it. Kant begins with the good will in order to uncover "the supreme principle of morality"—the categorical imperative. Since human virtue is defined in terms of conformity to law and the categorical imperative, it appears now that what is primary in Kantian ethics is not virtue for virtue's sake but obedience to rules. Virtue is the heart of the ethical for Kant, in the sense that it is the basis for all judgments of moral worth. But Kantian virtue is itself defined in terms of the supreme principle of morality. The conceptual commitment to agency and to long-term characteristic behavior rather than atomic acts and decision procedures for moral quandaries is evident here, as one would expect in virtue ethics. But what Kant prizes most about moral agency is its ability to act consistently from respect for law, not in the sense of following specific rules for specific acts, but in the more fundamental sense of guiding one's entire life by respect for rationally legislated and willed law.

Kantian virtue therefore is subordinate to the moral law, and this makes him look like an obedience-to-rules theorist. However, it is obedience to rules not in the narrow-minded pharisaic manner for which rule ethics is usually chastised by virtue theorists, but in the broader, classical sense of living a life according to reason. The two perspectives of agent and rule are thus both clearly present in Kant's account of the good will. The virtuous agent is one who consistently "follows the rules" out of respect for the idea of rationally legislated law. But "the rules," while they do serve as action-guides, are intended most fundamentally as life-guides.

REREADING MAXIMS

A second argument for a virtue ethics interpretation of Kant comes from a rereading of what he means by a "maxim." This strategy is particularly prominent in some of the work of Onora O'Neill and in a piece by Otfried Höffe.⁹ Kant defines a "maxim" rather

tersely as “the subjective principle of volition” (*Gr* 4: 400n, see also 420n), and from this one can infer that a maxim is (among other things) a policy of action adopted by a particular agent at a particular time and place. Because the principle is subjective rather than objective, it must tie in with the agent’s own intentions and interests. So why not simply view Kantian maxims as the agent’s specific maxims for his discrete acts? This is a common understanding of maxims, but it is also one that easily lends itself to a rule reading of maxims, since here a maxim becomes, in effect, a rule which prescribes or proscribes a specific act. O’Neill rejects the specific intention reading and argues instead that “it seems most convincing to understand by an agent’s maxim the *underlying intention* by which the agent orchestrates his numerous more specific intentions.”¹⁰ Suppose I have invited a guest to my house, and that my underlying intention is to make him feel welcome. On most such occasions, I will have numerous specific intentions by means of which I carry out the underlying intention: I may offer him a beer, invite him to put a record on the stereo, show him my vegetable garden, etc.

O’Neill offers two arguments in support of the underlying intention interpretation of maxims. (1) Usually we are aware of our specific intentions for the future, yet Kant frequently asserts that we never know the real morality of our actions. This suggests that maxims and specific intentions are not the same. (2) Sometimes we act without a specific intention (e.g., when we act absent-mindedly), but Kant holds that we always act on some maxim. All actions are open to moral assessment. This again suggests a difference between maxims and specific intentions.¹¹

Now if Kantian maxims are best seen as underlying rather than as specific intentions, we do have a strong argument for a virtue reading of Kant’s ethics. For our underlying intentions tie in directly with the sorts of persons we are and with the sorts of lives we lead. And the sort of person one is obviously depends upon what virtues and vices one possesses. One’s specific intentions, on the other hand, are not always an accurate guide to the sort of person one is “deep down inside.” This connection between underlying intentions and being a certain sort of person is stressed by both O’Neill and Höffe.¹² However, two basic problems confront this interpretation. First, O’Neill’s use of the phrase “underlying intentions” is ambiguous. At one point, she states that adopting maxims is a matter of “leading a certain sort of life, or being a certain sort of person”; elsewhere, she asserts that maxims (or underlying intentions) “need not be longer-term intentions, for we remain free to change them.”¹³ This distinction between underlying and longer-term intentions does not sit well with the asserted identification between underlying intentions and being a certain sort of person. For becoming a certain sort of person is a long-term process. One cannot decide at noon on Monday to be courageous and saintly, and then suddenly become so by Tuesday. And in what sense do we “remain free to change” the sort of person we have become? I believe there is a strong sense in which such change can be undertaken, but the effort and time required to carry it out are certainly much greater than are the effort and time required to change one’s specific intentions at any given moment. In short, the more that “underlying” intentions are untied from “longer-term” intentions, the less plausible it becomes to assert that maxims (in the sense of underlying intentions) have to do with leading a certain sort of life and with

virtue. For the latter are long-term ventures. One does not initiate, abandon, or change them on a daily basis.

One reason for O'Neill's odd insistence on the underlying/long-term intention distinction is perhaps traceable to Kantian texts. In several places, Kant warns that we must not construe virtue "merely as an *aptitude* [*Fertigkeit*] and . . . a long-standing *habit* [*Gewohnheit*] of morally good actions" (*MdS* 6: 383, 407; see also *Anth* 7: 147). His point is that human virtue is an extremely precarious achievement of pure practical reason which must constantly be on guard against heteronomy and empirical inclinations. In making this claim he is unfortunately led into some rhetorical skirmishes against Aristotle which reflect a poor understanding of Aristotle's own analysis of virtue.¹⁴ What Kant wants is a moral disposition "armed for all situations" and "adequately secured against the changes that new temptations could bring about" (*MdS* 6: 384). As O'Neill suggests, Kant is aiming at a distinctly modern conception of virtue here, one which is a response to the fragmentation of modern life and the breakdown of communities and institutions. Furthermore, behind his opposition to construing virtues as long-standing habits lies an acute awareness of our powers of rationalization and self-deception in repressing our sense of guilt. Kant might seem to have read his Freud. But nothing in these texts implies that long-term intentions must necessarily turn into mechanical habits, for we have seen already that cultivating a good will is, on Kant's view, an achievement of pure practical reason. So O'Neill's reservations about long-term intentions do not appear to be wellfounded.

The second problem with the underlying intentions reading of maxims is that it contradicts several of Kant's own examples of maxims. What he sometimes means by maxims are not life plans or even underlying intentions, but simply specific intentions for discrete acts. Furthermore, the testing of such maxims does not require that they be related to the life plan or the underlying intention of the agent. The maxim of the agent who feels forced to borrow money but knows he can't repay it is very specific, and applies only to restricted dire circumstances which may never even arise. Similarly, the maxim which reveals a perfect duty to refrain from suicide is again a specific intention which is not necessarily related to a life plan.

For these reasons then, the underlying intentions reading of maxims must be taken with a grain of salt. O'Neill's use of "underlying" is ambiguous, vacillating between specific and long-term intentions. Second, Kant's own examples of maxims indicate that what he sometimes means by the term is specific intentions for atomic acts. But because "maxims" for Kant can mean both short- and long-term intentions, we see again that he possesses and employs the conceptual tools to evaluate an agent's discrete acts as well as her course of life. This is to Kant's credit, for both enterprises are essential for an adequate ethical theory.

SELF-PERFECTION AND THE DOCTRINE OF MORALLY NECESSARY ENDS

There is one fundamental use of "maxims" in Kant's texts which unequivocally concerns underlying intentions and the sort of life one leads. This is what Kant calls maxims of

ends rather than of dutiful actions—maxims to pursue general, long-term goals (which allow for many different ways of pursuing them), rather than maxims to perform narrowly prescribed acts. The strongest argument for the prominence of virtue in Kantian ethics is to be gleaned from his doctrine of morally necessary ends as presented in the *Tugendlehre*.

Section 3 of the introduction to the *Tugendlehre* is entitled “On the Basis for Thinking of an End That Is at the Same Time a Duty” (*MdS* 6: 384). The core of Kant’s argument runs as follows: all acts have ends, for action (by definition) is a goal-directed process. Ends, however, are objects of free choice. We do of course have many desires, wants, and inclinations, which are biologically and/or culturally imposed, and nearly all ends that we do eventually adopt are also objects of desires, wants, and inclinations. But, ultimately, ends are chosen, for we cannot be forced to make anything an end of action; we ourselves must choose to. People can and do renounce even the biological desire for life in extreme circumstances. The adoption of ends is a matter of free choice, and this brings them under the purview of pure practical reason rather than of inclination.

But why assert that ends (which are freely chosen) are also morally necessary? Why claim that there exist ends which agents have a duty to adopt? Isn’t this merely a way of implying that all conceptions of the good are not created equal, that reason can discriminate among ends as well as among means? Isn’t this dangerously unmodern and illiberal? Perhaps, but Kant’s position is clear: we must assume that there are morally necessary ends, for if we don’t, “this would do away with any doctrine of morals [*Sittenlehre*]” (*MdS* 6: 385). His reasoning is that if all ends are contingent, then all imperatives become hypothetical. If we are free to accept or reject any goal put before us whenever we are so inclined, then all commands prescribing maxims for action are likewise open to rejection once the goal is dismissed. In other words (by contraposition), if there is a categorical imperative, there must be at least one morally necessary end. We cannot accept the claim that reason categorically requires us to do certain things unless we accept the companion claim that reason categorically requires us to adopt certain ends.

As is well known, Kant goes on to argue in the *Tugendlehre* that there are two ends which agents have a duty to adopt: their own perfection and the happiness of others. The former, for Kant, is the more fundamental of the two, and its connection to moral character is also more direct.

The duty which Kant asserts all agents have to promote their own perfection includes as its most important component the obligation to cultivate one’s will “up to the purest virtuous disposition” (*MdS* 6: 387). We saw earlier that the good will is the only unqualified good in the world or beyond it, that it in turn is the condition for the goodness of every other thing. Our highest practical vocation as finite rational intelligences is to produce a will good in itself as an unconditional end, for such a will is the supreme good and ordering principle for all human activities. We saw also that moral virtue, as Kant understands the concept, is a human approximation to the good will. Humans, because of their biological and cultural makeups, always have inclinations which may run counter to the moral law.

The duty to develop an attitude of virtue is obviously a duty to oneself rather than to others. And it is also an ethical rather than a legal duty, that is, a duty in which the motive for action is the thought of the law itself rather than threats of external compulsion. But what is most important to note for our purposes is that the duty to develop one's moral character is the linchpin of Kant's entire system of duties. As he remarks in his discussion of duties to oneself: "For suppose there were no such duties [viz., duties to oneself]: then there would be no duties whatsoever, and so no external duties either. —For I can recognize that I am under obligation to others only insofar as I at the same time put myself under obligation . . ." (*MdS* 6: 417).¹⁵

Without duties to oneself, no duties whatsoever. Why would Kant make such a claim? His chief contention is that what is basic to all duties—legal, moral, or otherwise—is the concept of binding oneself. Take first the familiar notion of a legal duty to others, say, a loan taken out with a lending institution to help pay for my graduate education. In one sense I am clearly bound to another party (the bank). But Kant's view is that this is so only because I first choose to bind myself to the laws of the government under which I am accountable for the terms of the contract. If I don't first choose to view myself as being obligated to obey my government's laws, it is not likely that I will consider myself to have any duty toward the bank. Similarly, consider a moral duty to others, e.g., the Kantian duty to promote others' welfare. Here I am not even accountable to any specific others, as was the case in the previous example, but only to my own conscience. We "owe it to ourselves" to do all we are capable of in fulfilling our moral duties to others.

Once Kant's argument concerning morally necessary ends is considered, it becomes strikingly evident that virtue does indeed have a preeminent position in his ethics. Our overriding practical vocation is to realize a state of virtue in our own character as the basis of all action. Without fulfilling such a duty to ourselves, other duties are not possible. Virtue is not only the heart of the ethical for Kant; it also has priority in morals considered as a whole (that is, in *Recht* and *Tugend* taken together). For if there were no ethical duties to oneself, there would be no duties whatsoever.

But again, virtue itself is posterior to the supreme principle of morality. Virtue remains conceptually subordinate to the moral law. Kant presents us with a virtue ethics in which the "rule of law" nevertheless plays the lead role, and in which the theory is designed to assess not only ways of life but discrete acts as well. However, as noted earlier, the priority of the moral law in Kantian ethics does not entail the pharisaic qualities which virtue critics have usually attributed to it. It does not mean that what dominates Kantian ethics is the attempt to construct a decision procedure for all acts, or even to devise determinate rules for a limited set of specific acts. Yet such attempts are generally conceded to be prominent in rule ethics approaches to practical reasoning. Instead, what we do find in Kant's ethics is the categorical command of reason to cultivate a way of life in which all of one's acts (whatever they may be) are in complete harmony with the idea of lawfulness as such. The moral will is subordinate to law in Kantian ethics and is defined in terms of it. But the result is not a legalistic conformity-to-rules morality, current interpretations to the contrary. It is a conception of a life lived according to reason.

VIRTUE AND EMOTION

While virtue has far greater prominence in Kant's ethics than many of his readers suppose, it is nevertheless overstating matters to assert baldly that Kantian ethics is virtue ethics. Significant aspects of both the agent and act perspectives are present in his ethical theory, though the former does dominate. Kantian ethical theory seeks to assess not only atomic acts but also agents' ways of life. And while the sort of person one becomes (rather than the specific acts one may perform and the short-term intentions one may adopt) is central in Kantian ethics, his conception of moral personhood is defined in terms of obedience to law. The Kantian agent commitment is inextricably fused to a law conception of ethics. Each of the three arguments outlined earlier points to these same conclusions, which is not surprising, since they are closely related to begin with. The later material from the *Tugendlehre* regarding morally necessary ends (of which the duty of moral self-perfection is the most important) restates and deepens the earlier material from the *Grundlegung* concerning the good will. The section on maxims establishes that while not all Kantian maxims refer to underlying intentions and agents' life plans, the most significant ones in ethics (maxims of ends) do.

One notorious roadblock to a virtue interpretation of Kantian ethics remains, and it requires an unconventional but (I believe) Kantian reply. Virtue theorists part ways with their deontological and teleological opponents over the issue of moral motivation. In virtue ethics, agents are expected to act for the sake of virtue; in deontology, for duty's sake; in utilitarianism, for utility's sake. Now at first glance it would seem impossible to argue that Kant espouses a virtue ethics position with respect to motivation, since he holds that only action from duty can have moral worth. However, as my earlier arguments indicate, Kant's notion of action *aus Pflicht* means in the most fundamental sense not that one performs a specific act for the sake of a specific rule which prescribes it (and likewise for other specific acts one performs) but rather that one strives for a way of life in which all of one's acts are a manifestation of a character which is in harmony with moral law. Action *aus Pflicht* is action motivated by virtue, albeit virtue in Kant's sternly rationalist sense.

But it is precisely on the issue of rationalism and moral motivation that Kant has come under such severe criticism. The motivation problem has been a favorite target of Kantian critics from Hegel onward, and to cover all of its dimensions is far beyond the scope of this essay. The following brief remarks focus instead on Kant's position regarding the role of emotion in action from virtue.

It is generally acknowledged that, from a moral perspective, the most praiseworthy acts are often those which agents truly want to perform. As Foot remarks:

Who shows most courage, the one who wants to run away but does not, or the one who does not even want to run away? Who shows most charity, the one who finds it easy to make the good of others his object, or the one who finds it hard? . . . The man who acts charitably out of a sense of duty is not to be undervalued, but it is

the other [i.e., the one who is directly moved and thus wants to act charitably] who shows most virtue and therefore to the other that most moral worth is attributed.¹⁶

The sense of “wants” here needs to be clarified, and I will attempt to do so in a moment. But first, a restatement of the underlying anti-Kantian argument: acting from virtue is (at least sometimes) action motivated by altruistic emotion or desire. Kant, however, holds that action *aus Pflicht* must be defined independently of all natural emotions and desires. Therefore, there is no place in Kantian ethics for acting from virtue.¹⁷

Now, back to “wants.” Does Foot’s agent who “does not even want to run away” act this way by nature or because he knows (in addition, perhaps, to being naturally inclined in this direction) that it is noble to do so? In Aristotelian terminology, does he act courageously out of “natural virtue” or from “virtue in the strict sense,” the latter of which involves *phronēsis*, a rational understanding of what one is doing? Aristotle and Kant agree on this fundamental point: acting from virtue in the strict sense means acting rationally. But Aristotle also holds that practical choice is “reason motivated by desire [*orektikos nous*] or desire operating through reason [*orexis dianoētikē*].”¹⁸ Desire and reason are both necessary factors in moral choice, but neither on its own is sufficient. How about Kant? Does acting from virtue, as he understands it, entail acting from desire (in addition to reason)?

Kant has so often been tagged as an enemy of the emotions that it may seem foolish even to ask the question. On most interpretations, Kant allows room for one (and only one) desire in his account of moral choice—respect or reverence (*Achtung*)—a unique “*a priori* feeling,” generated by a pure judgment which acknowledges the claim of the moral law, and then in turn acts as the phenomenal spur to action from appreciation of that law. But the role of emotions and natural inclinations in Kant’s understanding of moral motivation is trickier than is often assumed. On the one hand, he does assert unequivocally that “what is essential in the moral worth of actions is *that the moral law should determine the will immediately*” (*KpV* 5: 71). This way of talking is often construed as meaning that reason is not only a necessary but also a sufficient ground for moral choice, and that natural emotions (with the sole exception of *Achtung*, which again is an *a priori* feeling and thus not natural) have no positive role to play whatsoever. But while determination of choice through reason is obviously necessary in Kantian ethics, it is not sufficient for the attainment of virtue. There are a host of phenomenal emotions (the most important of which are joy, sympathy, and love) which, while not the direct *Bestimmungsgrund* of the will, must be present in a virtuous disposition. These emotions are phenomenal effects which, as Karl Ameriks puts it, have “noumenal backing” and find their ultimate source in a noumenal acceptance of pure duty.¹⁹ In less Kantian but more Aristotelian terms, these emotions are ones that have been trained *by* reason to work in harmony *with* reason. They are secondary in importance to respect, but they are nevertheless essential components in a morally virtuous life.

Granted, it is difficult to see this if one does not read past the *Grundlegung*. In that work, Kant is engaging in a form of analysis which he compares with a chemical experiment. He discriminates elements in a compound by varying the circumstances, and wants to break the compound into its base elements in the most effective manner. His assumption there is simply that it is easier to determine accurately whether an act was performed from duty if the agent had an inclination to perform the “opposite” act (e.g., feel antipathy rather than sympathy toward the suffering of others) than it would be if the agent were also inclined to perform the same act that duty requires. (Of course, even when natural inclination seems to be ruled out as an incentive, we still can’t determine with certainty what ultimately motivates the agent. Kant holds that our moral intentions remain opaque to us.) In a similar vein, Kant states in the second *Critique* that it is “risky” to view altruistic emotions as “co-operating” with the moral law in motivating moral behavior.²⁰ The reason, again, is that it becomes all the more difficult to ascertain the true motives of action when, in addition to acting out of respect for the law, one has a natural desire to act in the same manner as duty requires. Nevertheless, while it may indeed be risky to enlist the emotions, this does not rule out the possibility that proper cultivation of them may still be necessary for human beings who aspire to a truly virtuous life. And Kant explicitly asserts in his later writings that the emotions have a necessary and positive role to play in moral motivation. In the “Ethical Ascetic” of the *Tugendlehre* (which deals with the cultivation of virtue), he writes: “what is not done with pleasure [*mit Lust*] but merely as compulsory service has no inner worth for one who attends to his duty in this way and such service is not loved [*nicht geliebt*] by him; instead he shirks as much as possible occasions for practicing virtue” (*MdS* 6: 484). Here and elsewhere Kant addresses the need to cultivate a “habitually cheerful heart,” in order that the *feeling* of joy accompanies (but does not constitute or determine) our virtue. A parallel passage occurs near the beginning of the *Religion*:

Now, if we ask, “What is the *aesthetic* constitution, the temperament so to speak, of virtue: is it courageous and hence joyous [*fröhlich*], or weighed down by fear and dejected?” an answer is hardly necessary. This latter slavish frame of mind can never occur without a hidden *hatred* of the law, whereas a heart joyous in the *compliance* with its duty (not just complacency in the recognition of it) is the sign of genuineness in virtuous disposition.

(*Rel* 6: 24n; see also *Anth* 7: 282; *Päd* 9: 499)

These and other related passages state explicitly that the enemy-of-the-emotions reading of Kant favored by so many is a gross misunderstanding. Kant’s position is clear: pure practical reason needs to be always “in charge” of the emotions in a truly virtuous life. The *Bestimmungsgrund* of moral choice must be reason, not feeling. But an integral part of moral discipline, or what Kant calls “ethical gymnastics,” is training the emotions so that they work with rather than against reason. Acts in which empirical inclinations of any sort are the *Bestimmungsgrund* lack moral worth, but it doesn’t

follow that a harmonizing sentiment must cancel all moral worth. On the contrary, Kant insists that it is a good thing.

Kant then would agree with Foot's claim that the agent who does not even want to run away shows more courage than the one who wants to run away but does not, provided that the "want" in question is a rational want with which the agent's desires are trained to be in harmony. More generally, acting from virtue, on Kant's view, does entail disciplining the emotions through reason so that one comes to want to perform the same external act that reason commands. But again, as Kant warns, there is a risk, for in training the emotions in such a manner it becomes more difficult to assess one's motives for action. One is perpetually flirting with the possibility that one's conduct is not autonomously willed but merely a product of heteronomy, but cultivation of virtue requires that the risk be taken.

Kant's position on the emotions and their role in action from virtue is not inconsistent with a virtue ethics view. It is remarkably close to Aristotle's view, the major difference being that Kant was much more aware than Aristotle of the dangers of self-deception by emotional enthusiasm pretending to be moral inspiration.²¹