KANT ON VIRTUE AND THE VIRTUES

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Abstract: Immanuel Kant is known for his ideas about duty and morally worthy acts, but his conception of virtue is less familiar. Nevertheless Kant's understanding of virtue is quite distinctive and has considerable merit compared to the most familiar conceptions. Kant also took moral education seriously, writing extensively on both the duty of adults to cultivate virtue and the empirical conditions to prepare children for this life-long responsibility. Our aim is, first, to explain Kant's conception of virtue, second, to highlight some distinctive and potentially appealing features of the Kantian account of virtue, third, to summarize and explain Kant's prescriptions for educating young children and youth as well as the duty of moral self-improvement that he attributes to all adults, and, fourth, to respond to some common objections that we regard as misguided or insubstantial.

Keywords: Kant; Virtue; Moral education; Self-improvement; Moral luck

Immanuel Kant is known for his ideas about duty and morally worthy acts, but his conception of virtue is less familiar. Nevertheless Kant's understanding of virtue is quite distinctive and has considerable merit compared to the most familiar conceptions. Kant also took moral education seriously, writing extensively on both the duty of adults to cultivate virtue and the empirical conditions that prepare children for this life-long responsibility. Our aim is, *first*, to explain Kant's conception of virtue, *second*, to highlight some distinctive and potentially appealing features of the Kantian account of virtue, *third*, to summarize and explain Kant's prescriptions for educating young children and youth as well as the duty of moral self-improvement that he attributes to all adults, and, *fourth*, to respond to some common objections that we regard as misguided or insubstantial.

Kantian moral virtue: a good and strong will to do what is right

Although Kant mentions virtue throughout his works, his most thorough discussion of virtue is in his Doctrine of Virtue (*Tugendlehre*), which is the second part of his late work *The Metaphysics of Morals.*[1] Here Kant explains virtue as a kind of strength or fortitude of will to fulfill one's duties despite internal and external obstacles.[2] Kant distinguishes the realm of *ethics*, which concerns moral ends, attitudes, and virtue, from the realm of *justice*, which concerns rights and duties that can be coercively enforced. Although we speak of many virtues, Kant says repeatedly, there is really just one virtue.[3] To be virtuous is more than having a good will, for virtue, Kant says, is a kind of moral strength or fortitude. In other words, Kant implies that to be (fully) virtuous is to have a good will that is *firmly resolved and fully ready to overcome temptations* to immorality. This is an ideal that we can never fully achieve, though we have a duty to strive for it. To become more virtuous is not an easy task, and it requires time and practice as well as self-scrutiny.[4] The aim is not merely to avoid wrongdoing and to pursue moral ends but to do so for the right reasons.

What a virtuous person wills to do, more specifically, is determined by the system of ethical principles, which includes, for example, duties to others of love, respect, gratitude, and friendship as well as duties to ourselves to avoid suicide, lying, drunkenness, and servility. Although duties in the realm of law and justice (juridical duties) are distinct from ethical duties, we have indirect ethical duties to conform to juridical duties for moral reasons.[5] We also have an indirect ethical duty to promote our own happiness and to avoid cruelty to animals.[6] Although our sentiments are not fully subject to our control and are not what make our acts morally worthy, we have a duty to cultivate certain sentiments that can help us to fulfill our other duties.[7] The highest good

consists of perfect virtue and well-deserved happiness together. Kant concedes that this cannot be achieved in this life, but claims that we have reason to have faith or hope that achieving it is nevertheless possible in ways that we cannot comprehend.[8] These are some of the main themes in Kant's account of virtue.

In Kant's mature works, the ideal of virtue is to have a good will with the strength of will to do one's duty despite any opposing inclinations.[9] Let us review Kant's basic ideas about a *good will*. In the first section of the *Groundwork* Kant presents his conception of a good will, its special value, and its basic principle. In human beings, who have inclinations and imperfect wills, a good will is a will to do one's *duty* regardless of any contrary inclinations.[10] Although we can never know for certain that anyone acts purely from a good will, Kant says, a good will would be most evident if we had no inclination to do what we knew to be morally required but nevertheless did it *from duty* or, in other words, from *respect* for moral law.[11] Kant's examples are helping others in need and refraining from suicide when one has lost the normal inclinations to help and to continue living. Kant does not rule out that one could *have* and even *act from* a good will when one also happened to have an inclination to do what was required, but he insists that morally worthy acts do not rely on inclinations. Acting on the maxim "to help others if and only if it is my duty and also serves my interests" does not have moral worth or express a purely good will. Kant contrasts a good will with a *holy will*, or an absolutely good will in a being that lacks inclinations contrary to duty and necessarily wills in accord with reason.[12] Unlike imperfect human wills, a holy will could not be morally weak, or even tempted, and so would also not be subject to moral imperatives, duty, and obligation. This contrast brings out a central feature that is also present in Kant's

conception of a good will in human beings, namely, that it is a will to do what is required by reason. As he explains later, our duties are specified by an unconditionally rational principle (i.e. the Categorical Imperative).[13]

Kant eloquently proclaims that a good will has the special value of being not only *good in itself* but also *good without qualification.*[14] Unlike good qualities of temperament, gifts of fortune, and even happiness, a good will is good in all contexts. The point, often misunderstood, is about what, according to reason, we should choose, given various options. Specifically, no matter what would be gained, we should never for the sake of anything else choose to abandon or sacrifice our good will *by intentionally doing ("willing") what we know to be wrong.* This claim is most plausibly understood as primarily about valuing good willing in our own present choices, and its application presupposes that our judgment about what would be wrong to do has already taken into account relevant facts and substantive moral considerations. For example, assuming that one correctly judges that it would be all-things-considered wrong for one to steal ballots to get elected to office then one should not abandon one's good will-to-avoid-wrongdoing for the sake of power, money and fame – or even to help the poor. The special value of a good will, then, does not entail a repugnant fixation on "keeping one's hands clean" – for example, letting innocent people suffer and die simply to maintain one's "purity" rather than to do something non-ideal and normally wrong (such as fighting) to save them.[15] To choose to fight in such a case would not be abandoning one's good will unless one has good reasons for judging that the choice to fight would be wrong. The abstract claim that a good will is good without qualification does not, by itself, determine this.[16]

Given that a good will is unqualifiedly good, what does it will? Kant argues that the principle of a good will is what he later identifies as the Categorical Imperative –"I ought never to act in such a way that I could not also will that my maxim should become a universal law."[17] Using this principle and other versions of the Categorical Imperative, Kant claimed, we can determine what our duties are, at least if we understand the relevant facts and have developed "a power of judgment sharpened by experience."[18] How more specifically the several versions of the Categorical Imperative can guide our moral judgments has been much discussed and remains controversial, but our focus here is not on how the principle of a good will determines particular duties but rather on what virtue requires above and beyond having a good will and what it takes to develop virtue.

In the *Groundwork* Kant allows that a good will could (through some unfortunate fate) become "completely powerless to carry out its aims" despite its "utmost effort." His point is that it would still have its full worth, glistening like a jewel. We should note, however, that "powerlessness" of a good will here is not moral weakness but *lack of causal power* to bring about intended effects.[19] Imagine, for example, a person so inept, clumsy, stupid, and undermined by others that every good project fails, despite his earnest efforts. By contrast in later works Kant implies that one may fail because one *lacks the strength of* ***will*** to act as one should. We all have a "propensity" to weakness in our will to do our duty even if our fundamental will is good, that is, a basic commitment to subordinate self-love to duty.[20] We need to cultivate virtue or, in other words, to make our basically good will stronger so that we do not, weakly, yield to opposing inclinations.[21]

All this seems to fit with ordinary moral thinking, but it is philosophically puzzling. Strong and weak wills, in Kant's view, are not (like muscles) strong and weak physical capacities to exert force. We identify and explain our wills by reference to the maxims on which take ourselves to be acting – these express rationales or conceptions of what we are doing, our purpose, and (sometimes) our underlying reason for acting as we do.[22] Moral agents have wills in two senses. First, practical legislative reason (*Wille*) is our own reason which, in a sense, imposes the unconditionally rational moral law on us as our standard, even when we fail to comply with it. Second, moral agents have a power of choice (*Willkür*) which, for imperfectly rational persons like us, is an ability to choose to do what reason prescribes or choose to act otherwise.[23] In neither sense is the will an empirical entity that can be a part of a scientific explanation of bodily movements. We attribute wills to persons from a practical standpoint, as a presupposition of common morality and as capacities that are "noumenal" and ultimately beyond naturalistic explanation. We must regard our power of choice as "free" from determination by empirical forces and take ourselves to be responsible for how we use it. The person who chooses a good basic life-governing maxim (duty over self-love) has a good will; a person with a depraved (and so "evil") will is one whose basic choice is the reverse; but even a generally good will may be weak and not always in line with duty on particular occasions.[24]

One way we might understand weakness and strength of will is to think of a person whose basically good will is weak as having maxims at different levels, first, a general maxim over time to subordinate self-love to duty but also, second, despite this a specific maxim to do something contrary to duty on a particular occasion.[25] Clearly there

is a conflict in the will of such a person whose moral will is basically good but weak; in fact there is a double conflict: That is, the particular will to do something contrary to duty violates the rational prescriptions of the person's practical reason (*Wille*) as well as violates the good general maxim that the person chose (*Willkür*) to govern his or her life. By self-deception the weak but good-willed person may be only half aware of these conflicts, but in principle it seems that Kant can acknowledge the common belief that a person with a basically good will can sometimes knowingly and willingly do something wrong, succumbing to temptation but still making a free choice rather than being literally over-powered by the force of passions and inclinations.

We are all to some extent morally weak, lacking full *virtue* – the strength of will to do our duty always and for the right reasons. Kant implies that it is our duty to cultivate virtue in this sense, but this takes time and effort. Perfect virtue is an end to which we should aspire but cannot fully achieve (in this life at least).[26]

Moral luck and accomplishments

A distinguishing feature of Kant's theory of virtue compared to many others, including Aristotle's, is that Kant's theory holds that virtually everyone can and should become morally good and make progress towards virtue, regardless of their natural dispositions and feelings. At least from a contemporary point of view, this distinguishing feature may also be considered a merit of the Kantian view, for it holds that virtue is not an ideal reserved for those especially fortunate in their natural gifts, class, exemplary mentors, or social setting. In this respect Kantian ethics may be regarded as more egalitarian than some ancient theories that are more focused on perfecting an elite class of superior leaders. Kant held that whether or not a person is morally good and virtuous is

basically up to that person. To be sure, a background assumption is that the human predisposition to morality has not been irreparably blocked or distorted in childhood but instead has been developed so that as an adult the person has the capacity to be a responsible moral agent, good or evil, innocent or culpable. In his writings on education Kant also acknowledges that having the discipline and guidance of good teachers makes it easier for a child to become a good person, but Kant does not conclude that an unfortunate early education excuses one from the adult responsibility to avoid wrongdoing and to strive to become more virtuous.[27] Innate personality traits and feelings prompted by circumstances by themselves cannot make a person essentially a better or worse moral person, for this depends on what one chooses to do given the feelings and innate tendencies that one has.[28] The point is not just that these factors fail to determine completely how we behave, but rather that feelings and innate dispositions are not the kind of thing that constitute moral goodness because they are, as it were, aspects of ourselves that we simply find ourselves having and they do not necessarily reflect what we choose to affirm or indulge. The primary question of ethics is "What ought I to do?" and this question arises only when we have reason to believe that what we do is up to us – a choice among options that we have, not something beyond our control (as this is commonly understood). Whether to have various natural dispositions and feelings is not typically among our options for choice, and so their presence or absence is not a measure of how well we are doing what we ought to do or an essential criterion for the worth of our acts and character.

This is not to say that the fine and appropriate feelings esteemed by other virtue theorists are insignificant in the attempt to lead a morally good life. For example, failure

to feel sadness when seeing innocent people suffer or indignation at their being mistreated can be a fairly reliable sign that a person lacks a genuine moral commitment to the happiness of others as an end.[29] Some feelings, such as guilt, shame, agent-regret, resentment, and indignation, may be the effects rather than the causes of moral commitment in a normal human being or they may be analyzed as dispositions that are constitutive aspects of moral commitment rather than mere affects or inclinations. Feelings of sympathy and affection, as Kant says, can help to counter-act the darker and more destructive inclinations that often tempt us to make bad choices.[30] For various reasons, then, a morally good person will want to cultivate many of the feelings that other theories of virtue treat as constitutive of virtue; in other words, a morally good person will have reason to aim to become the sort of person who is disposed to have such feelings. Similarly, because vicious feelings are among the obstacles that we sometimes have to overcome, a good person will also try to eliminate these feelings so far as possible.

A related feature of Kant's theory of virtue that is not shared by all is that moral goodness and virtue do not depend on one's accomplishments or success in achieving the good results that one earnestly strives for. This too may be considered a merit of the Kantian view, even if (as Thomas Nagel argues[31]) in our uncritical judgments we often think of someone as a better person if her good efforts are successful than if they accidentally fail due to no fault of her own. Such judgments may stem largely from our inability to know that the unsuccessful person really failed despite the best moral commitment and effort and our suspicion that the bad outcome was not due purely to luck and accident. We punish murder more severely than attempted murder, but again this

does not necessarily imply that merely the difference in outcome revealed a difference in the moral worth of those convicted of murder and those convicted of attempted murder. With uncertainty of motives and intentions, there may be room to suspect that one made a more serious attempt than the other, and the threat of the more severe penalty could be supposed to deter some would-be killers from trying hard to carry out their initial plan. Alternatively, critical reflection may lead us to change our judgments and treat murder and attempted murder as morally equivalent, especially when it is stipulated that nothing but luck distinguishes the cases. It is also worth mentioning that Kant distinguishes culpability from responsibility for the consequences of one's wrongdoing, for he implies that all of the consequences of acts contrary to duty can be imputed to the agent whether or not they were intended or even foreseen.[32] This claim no doubt needs to be qualified but it shows that the Kantian thesis that the effects of one's actions do not determine their moral worth does not mean that one cannot be liable for the bad effects even when unintended.

Unity of the virtues

There is significant controversy among virtue ethicists and scholars of ancient philosophy about how, if at all, the virtues are unified, but the basic idea is that having any one of the virtues entails having them all – true courage, for example, is said to require practical wisdom to determine what is worth fighting for, justice to refrain from violating the rights of others, and temperance to avoid succumbing to frivolous desires.[33] Kant distinguishes *virtue*, which is the strength of will to fulfill all of our duties from a sense of duty, from specific virtues, which are commitments to particular moral ends.[34] Someone has the virtue of generosity, for example, if she sets the happiness of others as

one of her ends, from a sense of duty, and effectively structures her choices around that commitment. It is a *duty of virtue*, according to Kant, to be generous in this sense so a *virtuous person* has the strength of will to include help for others as one of her life's projects, despite inclinations or feelings she may have to the contrary. Kant therefore holds that there is only one virtuous disposition, which is a second-order readiness to do our duty from duty, but he denies that the specific *virtues*, such as beneficence, gratitude and self-respect, mutually entail one another.[35]

Virtues, according to Kant, involve setting specific ends.[36] Some may be surprised at the number and variety of ends that we are required to adopt on Kant's view. Self-preservation is the virtue of preserving our lives, freedom and rational capacities; self-respect is the virtue of valuing ourselves as persons with dignity; honesty is the virtue of scrutinizing ourselves and communicating our thoughts to others; thrift is the virtue of procuring and utilizing the means necessary for cheerfully enjoying the pleasures of life; self-improvement is the virtue of striving to perfect our natural and moral powers; beneficence is the virtue of setting the permissible ends of others as our own; gratitude is the virtue of honoring a benefactor for a kindness she has done for us; sympathy is the virtue of actively sharing in the feelings of others; sociability is the virtue of associating with others and forming friendships; and forgiveness is the virtue of not seeking or hoping for vengeance for wrongs done by others.[37] In his political and historical writings, Kant describes other ends that we are required to incorporate into our life projects, including perpetual peace, enlightenment, justice and cultural development.

If virtue is strength of a good will then presumably vice is strength of an evil will.[38] Kant thinks it is impossible for human beings to have diabolical wills, which will

evil for its own sake, but we can will to subordinate morality to self-interest for the sake of satisfying our inclinations.[39] Kant also distinguishes *vice*, which is a firm commitment to immorality, from specific *vices*, which involve refusing to adopt specific ends.[40] Some vices involve principled refusals to adopt morally required ends, such as a commitment never to help others, while other vices involve simply failing to adopt certain ends, such as allowing others to violate our rights.[41]

Kant's list of vices is more robust than is commonly recognized. Kant offers his own conception of the seven deadly sins, for example: Lust is the vice of surrendering ourselves to our sexual instincts; drunkenness and gluttony are vices of impairing our rational faculties; avarice or greed is the vice of procuring the means for enjoyment but not utilizing them and leaving one's true needs unmet; laziness is the vice of refusing to develop and utilize our natural powers; vengefulness is the vice of seeking or hoping for revenge for a wrong; envy is the vice of seeking to diminish the wellbeing of others because it is greater than one's own; and arrogance is the vice of demanding others lose respect for themselves and respect us more.[42] Other vices, according to Kant, include suicide, asceticism, servility, destroying feelings that promote morality, tempting others to immorality, malice, contempt, defamation and ridicule.[43]

Kant denies that the virtues are unified because he thinks that possessing any one of the virtues does not generally entail having all or most of the others.[44] We can be beneficent toward someone, for instance, but hold her in contempt.[45] He thinks that some of the virtues can be united, however. In close friendships, we are drawn together by our mutual love but kept at a distance by our mutual respect.[46] And self-improvement involves striving to develop and maintain a virtuous disposition to do all of our duties

from duty. But Kant thinks that the virtues usually impose limits on one another, as when respect for others involves acting as if our generosity is owed so that we do not humiliate the person we help.[47]

All duties, according to Kant, are united by the moral law, but duties of virtue in particular are further united by the part of the Categorical Imperative, as applied to human beings, that requires each of us to "regard himself, as well as every other human being, as his end".[48] Duties of virtue prescribe "many objects that it is also our duty to have as ends", but they are brought together as various ways of treating human beings as ends in themselves.[49] Duties of right, by contrast, are merely formal. They are concerned with "the consistency of outer freedom with itself if its maxim were made universal law," and are independent of the ends we happen to have.[50] Ethical duties are a third class of duty, they include all duties of virtue along with an indirect duty to do all of our duties of right from the motive of duty.[51]

Moral perfection, according to Kant, is an ideal that human beings must strive for even though we can never fully attain it. One reason is that human nature, according to Kant, includes inclinations and desires that tempt us to immorality, and our intentions, policies and commitments are somewhat opaque to ourselves and to one another. When we attempt to imagine a morally perfect human being, therefore, it is impossible for us to say whether she is conforming to duty only from the motive of duty or whether her inclinations are moving her as well. A further reason Kant gives for why we can never fully attain moral perfection is that it is impossible for us to imagine, in any concrete way, what it consists in, so we can never be sure that any set of specific virtues is complete and free from traits that are not virtues. For all we can know, there may be

virtues we have not considered, we may be mistaken in regarding certain characteristics as virtues, and we may not understand how the virtues cohere with one another. By analogy with perfect happiness, which is an end that we all have even though we can "never say definitely and self-consistently what it really is that they wish and will," the ideal of moral perfection is an end we must set for ourselves but it is not a fully determinate goal and the best we can do is strive ever closer to moral perfection.[52]

Virtue as the fulfillment of our moral nature

Virtue, according to Kant, is the fulfillment of our moral nature. Following the ancients, he describes someone who possesses virtue as "free", "a king", "healthy" and "rich".[53]

Virtue would make us *free* by subjecting our desires, inclinations and natural capacities to our own free choices rather than allowing ourselves to be involuntarily determined by habits or impulses. A virtuous person possesses self-control, she chooses whether or not to indulge her inclinations and decides how she will put her powers to use in service of her freely chosen ends.[54] She also strives for self-sufficiency by training herself to eliminate desires for things she cannot attain, to do without superfluous pleasures and to endure discomfort and misfortune, all while maintaining a cheerful spirit.[55] But a virtuous person does not attempt to rid herself of all inclination, nor does she intentionally impose discomforts on herself; she simply satisfies her basic needs and enjoys the pleasures of life within the bounds of morality without allowing herself to become dependent on them.[56]

When Kant claims, in the *Groundwork*, that "it must rather be the universal wish of every rational being to be wholly free" of inclinations, he does not mean that we

should actually take steps to do so, for our inclinations are part of our nature and not evil in themselves, even though they can tempt us to immorality.[57] His point may instead be that the ideal of a holy will, which necessarily conforms to reason without any inclinations to the contrary, is nonetheless unattainable for human beings who are always subject to impure motives.[58]

For all we can know, even the most innocuous inclinations can lead us astray, so we may wish to be rid of our inclinations in order to ensure that morality moves us to conform to its laws. This is impossible for us given our human nature, so the best we can do is strive for perfect virtue by governing our inclinations, refusing to be controlled by them and eliminating ones that are contrary to duty. Moreover, once we have arranged our uncritical, unreflective inclination into a system of non-moral ends, a rational person may then wish to be free of any other inclinations that remain in order to pursue her freely chosen plans and projects within the bounds of morality without influence from her distracting impulses.

Virtue would make us *a king* by bringing our desires, inclinations and natural capacities under the control of reason.[59] As rational agents, we have the bare capacity to conform to moral principles, but as human beings our sensuous nature can lead us astray. A virtuous person has mastery over herself, she practices good self-governance by ruling her desires, inclinations, mind and body by reason, and so strives to achieve inner unity and peace.[60] Her will is both autonomous and autocratic, it has legislative power to settle on moral principles independent of inclinations but also executive power to carry out those commands despite inclinations to the contrary.[61] A virtuous person, however, is not a fanatic about morality, she does not necessarily devote all of her time and energy to

self-improvement, beneficence, or moralizing to others, but exercises her freedom, within the bounds of duty, to set and pursue her own plans and projects.[62]

Virtue would make us *morally healthy* because our moral nature as free and rational human beings is fulfilled when we come close to achieving inner peace and self-mastery by firmly committing ourselves to moral principles.[63] Virtue would also tend to make us *physically healthy* because a virtuous person not only fulfills her duties to preserve and perfect her body and mind, and enjoys the pleasures of life, but her wellbeing is less affected by frustrated desires for superfluous things and misfortunes she might suffer.[64]

And virtue would make us *rich* because of the moral pleasure that comes from having and exercising our firm commitment to do our duty from duty.[65] Virtue makes us deserving of esteem from others, which may not be forthcoming, and it may bring external goods or great hardship, but virtue is its own reward because of the contentment and pleasure it would give us. A virtuous person is rewarded with a cheerful outlook by recognizing that she does not aim to do wrong and she stands ready to resist any temptation to do so.[66] Such a person does not feel coerced or compelled by morality, she is not gloomy, nor does she regard morality as an extorting tyrant. Although she is morally constrained, she does her duty easily, with a tranquil mind. Cultivating cheerfulness and tranquility is also an effective means to developing virtue in order to overcome the discomforts that sometimes come from doing our duty as well as setting an example that leads others to admire virtue. These attitudes are not essential to virtue, however, but are consequences of being a virtuous person or means to becoming one.

Kant faced up to the fact, however, that virtue may leave us destitute, despised, lonely and unhappy while vice may result in wealth, prosperity and prestige.[67] Although the virtuous person enjoys moral pleasures while the vicious one suffers pangs of conscience, we cannot be sure that most virtuous people will also be the happiest, at least in this life, so Kant argues that we must hope that someday virtue will be matched by reward in the form of the highest good.

Moral education of children and adolescents

Kant's account of the cultivation of virtue can be seen as divided into two parts. In works on pedagogy and practical anthropology Kant describes the empirical conditions that (he believes) help to prepare a child for moral agency while in the Doctrine of Virtue he presents his account of the moral duty of every competent moral agent to cultivate virtue.

Children, according to Kant, come with natural and moral predispositions that "lie within humanity," so the primary goal of moral education is to "unfold humanity from its germs and to make it happen that the human being reaches its vocation."[68] Kant distinguishes two stages of moral education: Discipline of children and cultivation of adolescents. Without discipline at the first stage, we are left as "savages" who are slaves to our own passions, and without cultivation at the second stage we remain in a "raw state" in which our natural talents and moral abilities are undeveloped.[69]

The first stage of moral education sets constraints on the "lawless freedom" of children but otherwise allows them to develop naturally.[70] Early on, children should be subjected to rules of the family or school, along with rules of games, so that they learn to behave and control themselves in the face of their emotions.

These rules share striking similarities with Kant's account of the nature of the laws of a state, which he claims are universal, necessary, unambiguous, public, and meant to protect the external freedom of all rather than govern inner motives. All children should obey the same age-appropriate standards, without exception, and teachers and parents must not show preference for one child over another when administering the rules. The rules must be treated as necessary standards, specifying age-appropriate duties that the children must perform exactly whether they want to or not.[71] The rules should govern external acts rather than inner desires or motivations and they should be announced in advance.[72] The content of the rules should be publicly designed to secure the external freedom of everyone, prevent harm, and help the children develop physically by giving sufficient time for sleep, work and play.[73] Children should also be given limited choice in specifying their own rules, such as when to go to bed within a certain period, but they must be strictly held to the rules they set for themselves.[74] And within the legitimate constraints of the rules, children must be given free reign to make their own choices.

Kant's account of how children should be punished is similar to his conception of legal punishment, which holds that the state should punish in proportion to the degree and kind of legal violation (*lex talionis*) without practicing disgraceful punishments, while the system of punishment itself is justified by the need to protect the external freedom of all.[75] The rules for children must similarly be enforced strictly, impartially and with punishments that are proportional to the offense but children should not be punished for the underlying motives that led them to obey or disobey.[76] Except in cases of lying, children at this stage lack the concepts of shame and honor so they should not be

punished by making them feel ashamed, showing them contempt or treating them "frostily and coldly".[77] Parents and teachers must not punish with demeaning or degrading treatment either, or attempt to break the wills of their children, for these can lead to a servile or slavish temperament. Nor should children be punished in ways that express excessive anger or rage, which can lead them to think that the rules are merely the result of someone's whims or emotions rather than universally necessary standards that are willed by a reasonable leader. Once the punishment is over, parents and teachers must not bear grudges against children and children should not be rewarded for following the rules.[78]

A system of publicly known and enforced rules of this sort helps children develop self-control, self-confidence and a cheerful disposition.[79] They learn that their choices face resistance from the choices of other children, who are on equal footing with them, which teaches them self-reliance, the ability to distinguish themselves through merit, and reciprocity.[80]

Once the child has learned to exercise his freedom of choice under rules, usually in early adolescence, the next stage of moral education is to help him to "make good use of his freedom" under constraints.[81] Adolescents over the course of their lives must ultimately decide for themselves to incorporate morality into their most basic life-governing maxim. Kant suggests some ways we might prepare adolescents to choose to have a good will, to develop strength of will to put their basic moral commitment into practice, and to work out for themselves what it takes to respect dignity in themselves and others.[82]

Adolescents must not be taught morality by threat, punishment or examples, but must learn to decide for themselves to act on universally necessary principles for the sake of duty itself.[83] The desires to be honored and loved by others, however, are "aids to morality," so once an adolescent has acquired the concept of honor, she should be shamed by looks of contempt and cold treatment for violating her duty, but physical punishment should not be used as a form of moral instruction.[84]

Adolescents have a latent notion of dignity that should be "made perceptible" to them. When an adolescent brings his own "idea of humanity before his eyes" he has "an original in his idea with which he compares himself."[85] Parents should avoid displaying vanity and encouraging it in their adolescents, so that young people learn to value themselves according to their own dignity rather than by the value that others place on them, which can lead to social vices such as arrogance and envy if they fail to do so.[86] Adolescents should be reminded that others have dignity as well, by, for example, forbidding them from giving orders to servants.[87] Some commentators have doubted that Kant regarded children as having dignity and rights, yet Kant emphasizes that when, for example, an adolescent arrogantly pushes a poorer child out of the way, instead of saying "Don't do that, it hurts the other one. You should have pity! It is a poor child," parents should reprimand them with contempt for violating "the rights of humanity."[88] Adolescents should also be made aware of the fundamental equality of persons, educated to the possibility of a better, more ideal world and encouraged in their cosmopolitan spirit.[89]

Kant suggests that a Socratic method can be used to elicit from the adolescent a "dry and earnest representation of duty."[90] By presenting a series of cases that involve

doing one's duty from duty, despite obstacles, as well as ones that involve failures to do so, students refine their latent idea of duty, practice exercising their moral judgment, begin to work up for themselves a system of first-order duties, and come to admire the firm and steady resolve to do one's duty from duty.[91] Students might be asked, for example, whether it is right to give away property that is owed to others or to tell white lies for the common good, or they might be presented with a case of someone who is able to overcome his fear of death in order to refrain from bearing false witness.[92] Tutors should not present examples of doing one's duty from duty as extraordinary or meritorious and they should avoid examples of "so-called ***noble*** (supermeritorious) actions" because they tend to engender "empty wishes and longings for inaccessible perfection".[93] Giving adolescents illustrative moral problems encourages a habit of moral approval and disapproval as a foundation for "uprightness in the future conduct of life", it also leads them to take pleasure in moral thinking and elicits an awareness and exaltation of their freedom over inclination, their rational disposition to do their duty from duty, and a sense of their own worth as persons with dignity.[94]

The duty of moral self-improvement

Once an adolescent has reached the stage of adulthood, when her rational capacities are sufficiently developed that actions can be fully imputed to her as their author, she is then under a duty to herself to continue perfecting her own moral powers. Kant's most explicit discussion of moral self-improvement is in his Doctrine of Virtue (*The Metaphysics of Morals*, Part II). The context is his discussion of ends that are duties for all morally responsible persons to adopt and pursue. Under the most general description, these are the duties to promote one's own perfection and the happiness of

others.[95] The former are divided into "a human being's duty to develop and increase his natural perfection, that is, for a pragmatic purpose" and "a human being's duty to increase his moral perfection, that is, for a moral purpose only."[96] Kant classifies these as "duties to oneself." This implies that the responsibility to fulfill the duty lies with each person, and it is not in general the business of others to try to make a person naturally or morally better ("more perfect"). Moreover, the primary reason why one should strive to improve oneself is not to enable one to fulfill duties to others but to treat one's own humanity as an end in itself.[97]

Kant divides duties to oneself into "perfect" and "imperfect" duties. Perfect duties to oneself "as an animal being" include duties to avoid suicide, gluttony, drunkenness, and "defiling oneself by lust," and perfect duties to oneself "as a moral being" include duties to avoid lying, avarice, and servility.[98] Imperfect duties to oneself include both the duty to increase one's natural perfection and – our primary concern here – *the duty to oneself to increase one's moral perfection*.[99] Imperfect duties, Kant says, do not prescribe particular actions but only "the maxim of actions." By this Kant apparently means that imperfect duties only specify general types of attitudes and actions (e.g. "love of one's neighbor" and "love of one's parents").[100] The moral law in prescribing maxims of action "leaves a playroom (*latitudo*) for free choice in following (complying with) the law..."[101] Kant hastens to add that this does not mean "permission to make exception to the maxim of actions but only to limit one maxim of duty by another," thereby widening "the field for the practice of virtue."[102] Kant evidently means at least that no one is exempt from the requirement to adopt and comply with imperfect duties, but scholars disagree about what more he means. Some have suggested that Kant means that missing

an opportunity to work towards fulfilling one imperfect duty (e.g. to help one's neighbor) is impermissible unless we are instead fulfilling some other duty (e.g. helping one's parents). This reading, however, seems both implausibly rigoristic and not a position that Kant consistently affirms.[103]

Another distinguishing feature of imperfect duties, according to Kant, is this: "Fulfillment of them is merit (*meritum*) = +a; but failure to fulfill them is not in itself culpability (*demeritum*) = -a, but rather deficiency in moral worth = 0, unless the subject should make it his principle not to comply with such duties."[104] This makes sense with respect to improving one's natural capacities and promoting others' happiness, but it is puzzling with respect to moral self-improvement. Obviously Kant did not mean that we can rest content with an aim to avoid wrong-doing 90% or even 99% of the time, blamelessly indulging our vices the rest of the time. We must sincerely make it our principle to try to cultivate virtue, but arguably we are not culpable for falling short of perfect virtue *insofar as this is due to the frailty of human nature or the indeterminacy of the duty*. The duty to increase one's moral perfection is not fully analogous to the duties to promote others' happiness and develop one's natural capacities. Kant says that the duty to increase one's moral perfection "is a *narrow* and *perfect* one in terms of … quality … and *imperfect* in terms of … degree, because of the *frailty* (*fragilitas*) of human nature."[105] The narrow and perfect duty, presumably, is to strive persistently towards moral perfection – a developed and effective will to fulfill all one's duties for the right reasons. The object of the duty (moral perfection and purity) is an uncompromised ideal, even though no exact degree of improvement towards the ideal can be specified as expected at any given time. The frailty of human nature apparently refers to the facts that

we are constantly liable to inclinations contrary to duty and that a ready effective will to overcome these inner obstacles (virtue) is not innate but is something that we have a hard and unending task to cultivate. Also "the unfathomable depths of the human heart" mean that we cannot measure our progress or know exactly what particular steps we need to take.[106] Kant suggests that scrutinizing one's motives for self-deceptive excuses, being alert to one's conscience, and keeping the basic moral law in mind are potentially helpful aids to self-improvement, but they are hardly sufficient. In Kant's view, in fact there are no specific steps or empirical conditions that can ensure progress towards moral perfection because this ultimately is a matter of strengthening one's moral commitment and resolve so that it is more effective. What moral agents will and how they can strengthen their wills, in Kant's view, is not empirically determinable.

Objections and replies

One common criticism of the Kantian moral agent is that she is a cold, unfeeling, emotionless, and purely rational monster. Kant's conception of rationality, however, as it applies to human agents, is not the narrow kind invoked by economists and rational choice theorists, but is closer to our common understanding of a reasonable person, someone who is sane, sensible and fair-minded. A fully rational person, according to Kant, is not just consistent and coherent in her mental states, she is committed to treating humanity in herself and others as an end in itself, she respects others and is genuinely concerned to promote their wellbeing, she is grateful, honest, forgiving and sociable, and not just as means to promoting her own ends, and she hopes for a peaceful, just and enlightened future. It's true that Kant downplays the role of feelings, but a commonsense understanding of emotions may involve rational commitments of the sort Kant describes

along with associated feelings that tend to result in human beings who adopt such policies.[107] Love, for example, may just be a practical commitment to do good for someone; but human beings who love others in this way also tend to have feelings of various kinds even if those feelings themselves are not essential to loving someone. And, as we have suggested, Kant thinks that feelings are an aid to morality and reward us for doing our duty, they are not good or bad in themselves, and they are an important part of what a virtuous person is free to enjoy within the bounds of morality.

Another objection to Kant's conception of the virtuous agent is that she will spend her life fixated on duty and striving for moral sainthood, to the detriment of other worthy pursuits.[108] Kant is very concerned, however, to emphasize that morality affords us significant latitude to form and pursue our own aims and projects – our ability to set and pursue our own ends, after all, is part of what makes us ends in ourselves. Although we are required to incorporate various kinds of ends into our conception of the good, such as the happiness of others, Kant thinks it is important that we are free, within the bounds of perfect duty, to decide how to organize and pursue those ends and to engage with many other kinds of values over the course of our lives. Even the requirement to strive for perfect virtue is itself a wide duty that allows us, on particular occasions, to pursue various non-moral activities. Kant is also highly critical of the "fantastically virtuous," who "*allows nothing to be morally indifferent* and strews all his steps with duties, as with mantraps," for he thinks that such a person is merely concerned "with petty details" such as "whether I eat meat or fish, drink beer or wine, supposing that both agree with me."[109]

Finally, Kant's moral theory may seem to be a rigoristic and burdensome system of rules that leaves little or no room for judgment, inventiveness or sensitivity to context

and uncertainty. A virtuous person, on Kant's view, conforms to strict duties, values moral ends of various kinds, and has a firm and strong will to do all that morality requires for the sake of duty. She does not experience moral requirements as burdens that she would rather be rid of, however, and she must exercise her judgment to decide what her perfect duties require on particular occasions and how best to express her commitment to moral ends. And, Kant's absolute prohibitions on, for example, lying and certain types of suicide may not be justified by his basic ethical framework, so a suitably reconstructed set of mid-level moral requirements that interpret and apply the Categorical Imperative to persistent human conditions may allow far more exceptions, sensitivity and room for moral judgment.[110]

The standards of morality, according to Kant, are necessary requirements of reason, but our human nature affects how we learn, experience and act on these principles. We are predisposed to recognize morality as authoritative, but guidance from enlightened teachers helps us commit ourselves to do what is right and adopt a variety of moral values and ends. Even then morality remains a constraint on our imperfect wills because we are always tempted by our natural inclinations and desires, so we also need a firm and considered resolve to follow through on our moral commitments. A person's moral character, according to Kant, does not depend on her temperament, habits or feelings but on whether she has committed herself to morality above all else and possesses the strength of will to put that commitment into practice.

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[1] Kant's works are abbreviated with these symbols followed by volume and pages in the standard Prussian Academy Edition:
G – *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*
MM – *The Metaphysics of Morals*
R – *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason Alone*
CPrR – *Critique of Practical Reason*
CJ – *Critique of the Power of Judgment*
LP – *Lectures on Pedagogy*
C – Collins' Lecture Notes
V – Vigilantius' Lecture Notes
[2] See also the Preface and Introduction to *The Metaphysics of Morals*, MM 6: 205-221.
[3] MM 6: 380; 383; 390.
[4] MM 6: 397, 441, 484.
[5] MM 6: 219-21, 394.
[6] MM 6: 388, 442.
[7] MM 6: 443, 457.
[8] R 6: 4-7, 97-8; CPrR 5: 110-32.
[9]MM 6: 380, 405–8, 477. See also (Allison, 1990, pp. 162-179); (Guyer, 2000, pp. 303-323) and (Wood, 2008, pp. 142-158).
[10] G 4: 394-402. A good will in this sense is an individual's choice, resolve, or will to do one's duty, not simply the inevitable predisposition to morality that, in Kant's view, is shared by all moral agents, even the worst. At G 4: 455, however, Kant apparently uses "good will" to refer to the latter.
[11] *Inclinations* are natural or acquired tendencies dispositions to act that are, in a sense, given facts with which we must deal, not inherently rational dispositions or tendencies that we can normally control at will. *Respect for (moral) law,* by contrast, is a disposition to conform to rational moral principles because one recognizes them as rational. To say that one has no inclination to do one's duty does not mean that one has no motivating tendency (moral "interest") in doing so, for in Kant's view recognition of a rational requirement tends to be motivating for rational agents (i.e. "pure reason can be practical").
[12] G 4: 414; 439.
[13] G 4: 413-421.

[14] G 4: 393-394.
[15] In his own moral judgments Kant sometimes allowed exceptions to norms that apply in most circumstances, for example, Kant allowed that killing in a just war or judicially prescribed execution were justified even though killing other human beings is generally wrong. His other principles, however, often allowed few if any exceptions, and so when a person with a good will held to these regardless of the consequences, that person might seem to be maintaining his good will (or "purity") at the expense of others' suffering but if his judgment is mistaken in such cases the error is not that he over-valued a good will but that his principles of duty were too rigorous.
[16] For more discussion of the point see (Hill, 2002a). The abstract thesis that a good will and only a good will is good without qualification does not by itself tell us what duty requires, but it is a first step in the argument of *Groundwork* I for a principle that does enable us to determine what duty requires. G 4: 402-403.
[17] G 4: 402, 420-21.
[18] G 4: 389.
[19] G 4: 394.
[20] R 6: 29.
[21] MM 6: 380, 383-384, 387, 390, 394, 404-10, 479-80.
[22] G 4: 402, 421; MM 6: 225–6.
[23] MM 6: 213, 18, 226. Gregor translates *Willkür* as *choice* and *Wille* as *will*
[24] R 6: 29-39.
[25] See (Hill, 2012a). One might doubt that such conflicts of will are possible in light of Kant's discussion of good and evil wills in the *Religion*, which may suggest that each and every action must be ultimately explained or rationalized in terms of our life-governing maxim. For an alternative account of Kant's conception of weakness of will along these lines, see (Cureton Forthcoming).
[26] MM 6: 384, 405, 447.
[27] CPrR 5: 97-100.
[28] See, for example, G 4: 394, 398-99.
[29] For more discussion, see (Hill, 2002c).
[30] MM 6: 457.
[31] (Nagel, 1979).
[32] MM 6: 227-8. Interpretation and problems are discussed in (Hill, 2000).
[33] (Hursthouse, 1999), (McDowell, 1979) and (Cooper, 1998) accept this thesis while (Swanton, 2003) and (Adams, 2006) do not. There are stronger and weaker versions of the unity of the virtues thesis: (Watson, 1984) suggests that having any one of the virtues entails being open to moral considerations grounded in the others; (Walker, 1989) suggests no set of characteristics counts as a virtue if it leads to violation of the minimal requirements of any other virtue; and Cooper interprets Socrates as arguing that the usual names of particular virtues all refer to the very same property, which is virtue in its entirety.
[34] MM 6: 395, 406.
[35] MM 6: 395, 406, 410, 447.
[36] MM 6: 394, 419.
[37] MM 6: 621, 435, 429-30, 452, 456, 473, 461.
[38] MM 6: 384, 391, 408.
[39] R 6: 35-6.
[40] MM 6: 384.
[41] MM 6: 390, 408, 464, 419.
[42] MM 6: 404, 432; V 27-657.
[43] MM 6: 485, 452, 443, 393-4.
[44] In a puzzling passage Kant denies the "ancient dicta" that "There is only one virtue and one vice" (MM 6: 405) because he claims that it is a feature of his ethical framework that "For any one duty only *one* ground of obligation can be found; and if someone produces two or more proofs for a duty, this is a sure sign either that he has not yet found a valid proof or that he has mistaken two or more different duties for one" (MM 6: 403). It is unclear how Kant thinks these claims are related other than that in his rationalist framework there are distinguishable duties of virtue, and so different virtues.
[45] MM 6: 448.
[46] MM 6: 469.

[47] MM 6: 449-50.
[48] MM 6: 395, 410.
[49] MM 6: 410.
[50] MM 6: 380.
[51] MM 6: 219-221.
[52] G 4: 418; MM 6: 384, 405, 447.
[53] MM 6: 405.
[54] MM 6: 407, 408; V 27: 626.
[55] C 27: 392, 394; MM 6: 484.
[56] MM 6: 484-5; R 6: 34-5.
[57] G 4: 428, R 6: 21, 34-5.
[58] MM 6: 383, 405.
[59] MM 6: 408.
[60] C 27: 368.
[61] MM 6: 383; V 29: 626.
[62] MM 6: 408-9.
[63] MM 6: 384, 409.
[64] MM 6: 484-5.
[65] MM 6: 391.
[66] MM 6: 485.
[67] V 29: 623.
[68] LP 9: 445.
[69] LP 9: 440-2. The stages are divided somewhat differently in the section of the Collins lecture notes called "Of duties in regard to differences in age" (C 27: 466-71).
[70] LP 9: 459; C 27: 467.
[71] LP 9: 482; 488.
[72] LP 9: 481.
[73] LP 9: 449, 455.
[74] LP 9: 481-2.
[75] MM 6: 331-3.
[76] LP 9: 481-4.
[77] LP 9: 465, 482, 484.
[78] LP 9: 481-4.
[79] LP 483, 485, 491-2.
[80] LP 9: 442-3, 453-4.
[81] LP 9: 453, CJ 5: 431.
[82] LP 9: 475.
[83] LP 9: 480.
[84] LP 9: 482-4.
[85] LP 9: 489.
[86] LP 9: 486, 491.
[87] LP 9: 498.
[88] LP 9: 490. See (Korsgaard, 1996; Wood, 1998).
[89] LP 9: 447, 499.
[90] CPrR 5: 157; MM 6: 411-12.
[91] MM 6: 484; CPrR 5: 154; R 6: 48.
[92] LP 9: 490; CPrR 5: 35.
[93] CPrR 5: 155, 157; R 6:49.
[94] CPrR 5: 154, 160-1.
[95] MM 6: 385-388, 391-394.
[96] MM 6: 444-447.
[97] For more regarding Kant's idea of duties to oneself, as we interpret it, see (Hill, 2012b).
[98] MM 6: 421-437.
[99] MM 6: 444-447.

[100] The reference here is to "practical love" rather than feelings of affection. Practical love requires an active commitment to promote the (permissible) ends of others. See MM 6: 449-450.
[101] MM 6: 390.
[102] MM 6: 390.
[103] See, for example, (Cummiskey, 1996, pp. 110-111, 116; Hill, 2002b, pp. 219-224).
[104] MM 6: 390.
[105] MM 6: 446. Kant's emphasis.
[106] MM 6: 447.
[107] See for example (Nussbaum, 2001)
[108] See for example (Wolf, 1982)
[109] MM 6: 409. Kant's emphasis.
[110] Kant's discussions of practical issues ("applied ethics") in *The Metaphysics of Morals, Lectures*, and elsewhere often show a more subtle and qualified understanding of the implications of the Categorical Imperative than is evident in the *Groundwork.* Even so, few Kant scholars defend all of Kant's particular moral judgments as entailed by the best interpretations of the Categorical Imperative. (The most brilliant physicists are not necessarily infallible or even best at applying principles of physics to building bridges.) Some Kantians attempt to explain how the basic moral framework expressed in the Categorical Imperative can warrant more circumscribed and tenable moral judgments on practical issues than Kant himself endorsed. See, for example, (Hill, 2012c, Chapters 12-14; O'Neil, 1996; Wood, 2008).