

**Kant under the Bodhi Tree?**  
**Anti-Individualism in Kantian Ethics<sup>1</sup>**

*Draft, intended for a forthcoming festschrift for Béatrice Longuenesse*

Karl Schafer

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I want to consider a complaint about Kantian ethics that has become increasingly prominent in contemporary debates about Kant’s continuing significance. This worry centers on the idea that Kantian ethics cannot do full justice to the *social* or *intersubjective* dimensions of human life – that, unlike Fichte, Hegel, or Marx, Kant remains trapped within a fundamentally individualistic perspective on practical or moral questions, which cannot satisfactorily account for the *intersubjective* dimensions of moral normativity. In this way, the objection continues, Kantian ethics ultimately leaves the Kantian moral agent fundamentally alienated from those around them, and from the larger community of which they are one part.<sup>2</sup>

As we will see, such concerns are not at all unnatural. Nonetheless I want to argue that they rest on a fundamental mischaracterization of where the most serious problems in this region for Kant lie. Far from being too individualistic, the real worry about Kantian moral theory here is that *it may not be individualistic enough*. Thus, if there is a worry for Kantian ethics in this region, and to some degree I agree that there is, it has a very different shape that many contemporary critiques of Kant or Kantianism assume.

In a contemporary context, where Kantian ethics is associated with the “self-constitution” of individual agents, or the “separateness of persons”, the idea of Kantian ethics as insufficiently

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<sup>2</sup> For some notable versions of this idea, see (Thompson 2004; Darwall 2006; Haase 2014; Walden 2012; Zylberman 2018; Walden 2018; Ford 2018; Wallace 2019; Tarasenko-Struc 2020; Samuel and Peterson 2021; Rödl 2021; Zylberman 2021; Samuel 2022, 2023; Darwall 2023), but this is a very partial list.

concerned with individual agents or persons will likely come as a surprise.<sup>3</sup> But, as we will see, it would not surprise Kant's immediate successors like Fichte and Hegel. For this is exactly where they often located the deepest problems facing Kant's moral philosophy. For example, Hegel does of course complain that the Kantian moral law is an "empty formalism". But, for him, this is a symptom of a deeper problem: Kant's inability to do justice to the importance of determinate particulars in an ethical (or non-ethical) context. In other words, for Hegel, the fundamental problem with Kantian ethics is that it fails to properly reconcile the universal dimensions of ethics with the individual or particular. It is this, according to Hegel, that condemns Kant's moral law to "empty formalism". And it is this that leads to Hegel turn from the abstract consideration of practical reason *as such* he finds in Kant to a consideration of the forms reason can take within the social domain of Spirit (*Geist*).<sup>4</sup>

As we will see, in making these moves, Hegel is in some ways closer to Kant than he may have recognized. So, it is not as easy as one might think to locate where exactly Hegel is moving beyond Kant. But the important point at present is that Hegel's turn from Kant's abstract conception of practical reason to a more explicitly social conception of ethical life is motivated primarily, not by a belief that Kant's ethics is too individualistic, or that Kantian ethics cannot do justice to the intersubjective character of moral demands, but rather by a more general complaint: that the Kantian conception of morality cannot do justice to the relations between universal moral principles or ideals and the determinate individuals or particulars they apply to, and that this is true *even in the first-person or individual case*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The first idea is, of course, most prominent in (Korsgaard 2009)'s quasi-existentialist reworking of the foundations of Kant's practical philosophy. The second is, of course, fundamental to (Rawls 2009)'s critique of utilitarianism.

<sup>4</sup> Compare the discussion of (Walden 2018). But note, as we will see, that the social turn is only part of the answer for Hegel. Remember, for example, that Hegel's final critique of Kant's philosophy in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* comes *only at the end* of Spirit chapter with Hegel's critique of the sort of "dissemblance" that (according to him) characterizes the "moral worldview" – a worldview, that is, in which the unity of nature and morality is merely postulated, as opposed to being an object of genuine comprehension. As this indicates, the work of Spirit for Hegel does *not* resolve what Hegel takes to be the most fundamental problems with Kant's philosophy. Rather the transition to Spirit is part of the set up for *the final statement of this problem*.

<sup>5</sup> This worry is often applied to the German Idealists themselves. For perhaps the clearest example of this concern about the Idealists' attempts to "complete" the Kantian system, see Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: "Thus when an existing individual asks about the relationship between pure thought and an existing individual, pure thought makes no reply, but merely explains existence

As I hope to explore here, this has potentially quite profound implications for how we understand Kant's legacy in practical philosophy. If this is right, Kantian ethics is in a sense *more anti-individualistic* than many of the ethical systems that followed in his wake, including those of Fichte and Hegel. If so, then, from a certain perspective, it might be Kant who is the *most ethically radical* of these philosophers. Indeed, when viewed in this way, the most radical elements in Kant's ethics might point, less to Fichte's and Hegel's attempts to reconcile the universal with the individual in ethics, and more towards figures like Schopenhauer who sought to develop a post-romantic synthesis of Kant and ideas they associated with the Indian philosophical tradition. Perhaps, we might say, Kant has really been sitting under the Bodhi tree all along?<sup>6</sup>

### **Intersubjective Alienation in Kantian Ethics**

But let's begin with the worry that Kantian moral theory presents us with an objectionably individualistic perspective on practical or moral questions. This charge is prominent, for example, in recent discussions of Korsgaard's form of Kantianism, where one often finds the suggestion that Korsgaard cannot provide a satisfying treatment of intersubjective moral norms because she cannot successfully transition from an account of how each of us *self-constitute* ourselves as agents to a genuinely interpersonal normative perspective that involves normative relations between us and other agents distinct from us. Thus, as one recent critic puts it, many have worried that, "To start with an individualistic account of the source of normativity and wind up with a full-throated vindication of normative facts as facts about concrete others appears to involve crossing a gap," a gap which seems to alienate the Kantian moral agent from those around them and the larger community of which they are a part.<sup>7</sup>

Similar worries have been raised by many – but perhaps most notably by Darwall in his important work on second-personal ethics.<sup>8</sup> In her own response to Darwall, Korsgaard

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within pure thought and so confuses everything. It assigns to existence, the category upon which pure thought must suffer shipwreck, a place within pure thought itself; in this fashion everything that is solid about existence is essentially revoked." (Kierkegaard 1974, 278) Thanks to Eric Wiland here.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as we will see, it might even be true that the same could even be said for Rawls.

<sup>7</sup> (Samuel 2022, 23). Compare (Tarasenko-Struc 2020, 90).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., (Darwall 2006).

emphasizes that, for her, “every rational agent stands in what Darwall would call a second-personal relation to herself”. (Korsgaard 2007, 11) But at the same time, she concedes that:

... this cannot be the whole story. As I mentioned earlier, this does not by itself get us to the idea that I owe a certain kind of treatment to you. ... We need the second-personal reason for the latter conclusion. (Korsgaard 2007, 11)

Thus, the way Korsgaard presents her own views – both here and in her classic *Sources of Normativity* – certainly suggests that she faces the challenge of extending her account of one’s relationship to oneself as an agent so that it also accounts for one’s relationships to others.<sup>9</sup> According to her critics, the appearance of such a gap is itself symptomatic of a more fundamental problem. For them, the very sense that there is a gap to be crossed only arises because Korsgaard’s account privileges, in one way or another, our first-personal relation to ourselves over our relations to others around us. Thus, the sense that there is a gap to be crossed at all is, for them, a symptom of Korsgaard’s insufficiently intersubjective starting point for ethical theorizing.

Exactly what be needed to “cross this gap” successfully is, of course, the subject of much dispute. But at the very least, it seems to require two things. First, an account on which agents have non-derivative reasons to care about others – reasons, that is, that are not explained by more fundamental self-directed reasons. And second, an account on which agents stand in certain sorts of *directed* normative relations to others – so that, for example, we can make sense of one agent *owing something to another* (as opposed to simply owing it to morality in some more abstract sense). Call the first of these, **Altruistic Reasons**, and the second, **Directedness**.<sup>10</sup>

Once again, Korsgaard is the most common contemporary target of such concerns. But they are hardly specific to her. Indeed, as many have noted, similar worries arise quite naturally in the

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<sup>9</sup> (Korsgaard 1996)

<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Jeff Helmreich for pushing me to more explicitly distinguish these two aspects of the problematic at issue here.

context of some of Kant's own arguments.<sup>11</sup> Consider, for example, the enigmatic argument for the Formula of Humanity (FH) in the *Groundwork*:

The ground of this principle is: *rational nature exists as an end in itself*. The human being necessarily represents his own existence in this way; so far it is thus a *subjective* principle of human actions. But every other rational being also represents his existence in this way consequent on just the same rational ground that also holds for me;\* thus it is at the same time an *objective* principle from which, as a supreme practical ground, it must be possible to derive all laws of the will. The practical imperative will therefore be the following: *So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means*. We shall see whether this can be carried out. (GMS 4:428-9)

Much like Korsgaard, Kant *seems* to move here from a first-personal claim about how the human being must represent their own “rational nature” to themselves *to* the claim that every rational being must represent their “rational nature” in the same way on the “same rational ground” *and only then* to the claim that every rational being must represent other rational beings’ rational nature in the same way. Given this, it is no surprise that many commentators have concluded that, given Kant’s set-up, there is a gap to be crossed here – and that this is a symptom of the fact that Kantian ethics fails to be fully intersubjective in the sense it needs to be to accomplish its aims. As already noted, perhaps the most prominent version of this complaint is due to Darwall. He argues that Kant *aims* to develop an account of a “realm of ends” that embodies genuine relations of mutual respect between rational individuals. But, according to him, what Kant provides us with is something different. For Darwall, *Kant’s* realm of ends is not really “an interpersonal realm of joint reasoning,” but rather a merely “multi-personal” collection of individuals who ultimately relate to one another by constraining each other through force. (Darwall 2023, 338)

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<sup>11</sup> My discussion adapts elements of (Schafer 2023). For similar approaches to the foundations of Kant’s philosophy, see (Longuenesse 1998; Kern 2006; Engstrom 2009; McDowell 2011; Reath 2013; Merritt 2018).

But is it right to present Kant in that way? Does, for example, the Kantian account of practical reason really privilege my first-personal relationship to myself over my relationships to others in the manner these objections claim? In considering these questions, I think it useful to foreground the foundational role of practical reason as a *faculty* or *capacity* for Kant's philosophy. From this "capacities-first" or "reason-first" perspective, to properly understand Kant's various formulations of the moral law, we need to see them as attempts to specify the fundamental principle that characterizes practical reason as a capacity from a variety of different perspectives internal to that capacity. Since Kant takes practical reason to be the capacity for systematic practical cognition and so action from principles, this involves seeing these formulas as different ways of characterizing the capacity for this sort of *systematic practical understanding* (*Begreifen*) or *wisdom* (*Weisheit*). As I've argued elsewhere, this represents the core of Kant's distinctive form of rational constitutivism – a constitutivism which attempts to characterize the form that *both* practical deliberation itself *and* its objects must take if the objects of practical deliberation are to be intelligible to us in the manner practical wisdom and intelligent action require.<sup>12</sup> Since, for Kant, the most fundamental objects of practical concern (ends in themselves) are themselves subjects (that is, rational beings), the result of this is a *system* that ultimately connects both the objects of practical deliberation and the subjects who are so deliberating under a single overarching set of principles and values, rooted in the nature of practical reason itself.

On this approach, a principle like the Formula of Universal Law (FUL) characterizes what this sort of systematic practical wisdom or intelligent action from principles must be like on a formal level – that is, in terms of a formal constraint that systematic practical understanding or wisdom places on us as practical thinkers and agents. The FH, on the other hand, characterizes practical wisdom in terms of wisdom's proper *objects* – that is, in terms of the *ends* that practical reason strives to realize through action. In doing so, I argue, it draws on Kant's general account of rational capacities. One of the central elements of that account is the broadly Aristotelian idea that every rational capacity must treat its own proper exercise as its "formal end" – as an abstract end that gives a teleological structure to all its activities.<sup>13</sup> When applied to practical reason, this means that every rationally permissible maxim can be thought of as a way of making

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<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the moral law may be thought of as something like a practical analogue of a non-standard version of the principle of sufficient reason. See again (Schafer 2023).

<sup>13</sup> See (Engstrom 2009; Reath 2010; 2013; Tenenbaum 2019; Schafer 2019).

more determinate the very abstract aim of *practical reason respecting itself and its proper exercise*. In this way, by considering the nature of practical reason as a capacity, we arrive for Kant at the result that whatever else it wills, practical reason is always (at least implicitly) also willing that it actualize itself through its own characteristic form of activity.

Crucially for us here, what is at issue in such claims is not really the relationship of *my* faculty of practical reason to itself. Rather it is the relationship that practical reason *in general* should have to itself *wherever* it finds itself. In other words, for Kant, what reason must respect is most fundamentally *just reason itself*.<sup>14</sup> This involves a form of “recognition respect” in Darwall’s classic sense of this term, but it also involves a *striving* on the part of reason to realize itself in its characteristic mode of activity – in the sort of practical cognition and action from principles that is characteristic for Kant of wisdom, autonomy, and the good will.<sup>15</sup> In short, if this is right, we can extract one very abstract end from the bare idea of pure practical reason as a rational capacity – and this end *at least* demands that *everyone’s* faculty of reason “respect” the actualization of *everyone’s* rational capacities, just as the Formula of Humanity claims.

### **Don’t Mind the Gap: Kant’s Practical Anti-Individualism**

What is the significance of this for the charge that Kant’s conception of morality fails to do justice to the intersubjective or social dimensions of human morality? I agree that such concerns points to real issues. But I think that the contemporary focus on intersubjectivity *per se* involves a subtle, but important misinterpretation of where these problems lie. After all, as we have just seen, for Kant, what reason must respect is mostly fundamentally just reason itself. So, the respect that reason owes to rational individuals in virtue of their possession of reason – or the respect that one rational individual owes to another – are ultimately downstream, for Kant, from the more fundamental respect that reason in general owes itself.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This will be true of both practical and theoretical reason. It is this, for Kant, at least, that is at issue when we speak of “respect for reason” in a mass sense. Contrast the treatment in (Fogal 2016) here. For further thoughts about the contemporary relevance of “reason” in a faculty sense, see (Schafer 2018; 2020).

<sup>15</sup> (Darwall 1977), and compare: “In a sufficiently broad sense of ‘power,’ recognition respect may always be for a power of some kind or other.” (Darwall 2021, 195)

<sup>16</sup> Compare Timmerman’s interpretation of such passages to mean that for Kant: “We must treat human beings as ‘ends in themselves’ because they possess a pure will, which literally *is* its own end

This should indicate that there is nothing especially “individualistic” or “merely first-personal” about Kant’s conception of reason. For example, there is little reason for concern here about the ability of the Kantian to do justice to existence of genuinely Altruistic Reasons. And more generally, the target of Kant’s account of reason is a capacity for rational cognition and action from principles – which might (in principle) be realized in a wide variety of ways. So, one of the strengths of Kant’s focus on reason as a capacity is its fundamental metaphysical flexibility.<sup>17</sup> For example, nothing in Kant’s view conflicts with the idea that human forms of rationality can be realized *only* by social collectives as opposed to individuals. Indeed, we will see that there is good reason to think this is Kant’s view of this matter, at least on some level. In this sense, Kant’s focus on reason as a rational capacity is *at worst neutral* with respect to these issues.

In other words, Kant’s view implies that if we take the actual existence of some plurality of rational individuals as given, the nature of reason should place those individuals into relations of reciprocal respect of the sort that are characteristic of a “realm of ends”. In that sense, the idea of practical reason as a capacity carries with it the idea of such a community *as an ideal and as a real possibility*.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, the idea of such a community is based, for Kant, on a distinctive structure that involves relations of *reciprocal dependence and independence* between its members, in accordance with

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(as well as law unto itself)”. (Timmermann 2012, 217) The resulting account of respect resonates nicely in many ways with that developed in (Sensen 2021). This helps to explain why it is natural to appeal to idealized versions of us in trying to spell out the implications of this sort of respect, as in (Hill Jr 2000).

<sup>17</sup> See the insightful discussion of (Walden 2020).

<sup>18</sup> If this is right, Darwall’s real problem with Kant may be that Kant is *too much of a realist* about the respect that reason owes itself. For Kant, it follows from the nature of practical reason that any instance of this capacity ought to relate to any other in this way, independently of any sort of quasi-judicial social or intersubjective process. In this sense, on Kant’s account, reason is fully intersubjective *from the start*. Darwall, on the other hand, at least at times seems to view this sort of intersubjective normativity as something that must arise out of social interactions between individuals. In this sense, it may be Darwall who is more of a constructivist here, and Kant who is more of a realist. As this indicates, there is nothing in what I am saying here that needs to conflict with an emphasis on the relational character of moral normativity. The point is only that that relational structure or “form” is inherent in practical reason itself. Compare (Wallace 2019)’s critique of Darwall’s “voluntarism” here. For more on relational readings of Kant, see (Zylberman 2018).



the general Kantian category of “community”. So, within such a community, individuals will be connected via relations that have just the character that is often associated with directed rights and duties, just as a community of physical substances in the theoretical sphere is characterized by the reciprocal dependence of activity and passivity in those substances. As this indicates, at least on a formal level, reason is *always already intersubjective* for Kant – and this form of intersubjectivity involves relatively clear examples of directed normative relations.<sup>19</sup> So, there is nothing here, on the formal level at least, that should conflict with a desire to do justice to Directedness either.

At the same time, the Kantian focus on the idea of the moral community suggests a picture where it is not really directed duties *per se* that matters most here. Rather, what is most important for the Kantian is a sort of reciprocity that such relations (in part) make possible. If so, the most Kantian approach to these issues might be to focus, less on directedness *per se*, and more on the ideal of reciprocity as such.<sup>20</sup> Given this, Kant’s conception of reason is in some sense *more* deeply intersubjective – not just than accounts that try to construct a community of equals *out of individuals* – but also accounts that attempt to do so out of (say) individuals *and relations between them*. Such views proceed as if the problem with ethical atomism is that it starts with too constrained a set of building materials – as if it only needs to use *all the pieces* in the Tinkertoy box to succeed. As I understand it, Kant’s conception of genuine moral community is opposed to *all* such views. For Kant, a genuine rational community is one that is organized around the idea of a certain kind of systematic unity – an idea of the intersubjective *whole*.

If this is right, the charge of individualism or atomism is misguided when directed at Kant, at least at this formal level. But this does not mean that there isn’t a problem here for Kant. Rather, on my reading, the difficulties really begin when we try to move beyond the *formal intersubjectivity* that characterizes *reason as such* to some more determinate or concrete way of realizing that general form. For instance, for all we’ve said, the capacity of practical reason we are discussing might be realized by a single rational substance *or* by a community of such beings

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<sup>19</sup> Thus, I agree with recent accounts that stress the compatibility of Kant’s account of reason with second-personal forms of respect, although I do so on rather different grounds. See again the discussion in (Zylberman 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Perhaps along the lines stressed by Julius in some of his unpublished work on this topics.

*or* by something else entirely. So, while practical reason necessarily carries with it the abstract idea of a community of rational beings as a possibility, we cannot infer from this that such a community exists – nor can we infer anything determinate about the individuals who realize reason in this generic sense.

This is true, even though it is also true that practical reason, like reason in general, necessarily carries with it a deliberative point of view which can be expressed using the first-person. For, at least according to Kant, this use of the first-person, on its own, carries with it only *very* minimal commitments about *what it is* that realizes the capacity or point of view in question.<sup>21</sup> We might express this by saying that practical reason (at least in our sense) is essentially first-personal, but *only in its form*. The formally first-personal character of practical deliberation is compatible with everything we have been saying – provided that this first-personal form does not determine the nature and boundaries of the subject or subjects whose point of view is in question.<sup>22</sup> And it does seem plausible, to me at least, that the bare form of first-personal practical thought does not answer such questions on its own.

If this is right, the real danger for Kant is not how to turn a fundamentally individualistic Kantian ethics into something social and intersubjective, but rather how to turn a general and abstract account of reason as a capacity into an account of how this capacity is realized by particular rational individuals *or* communities. If so, the real gap here is not one separating *one*

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<sup>21</sup> I take this to be one of the main lessons of the Paralogisms. This is true, even if it is guaranteed by the nature of such thoughts that they refer to some thinker – namely, the thinker who is thinking the very thought at issue. For Kant at least, we might possess such an entitlement without thereby being entitled to any determinate way individuating the subjects of the pieces of understanding at issue – even to the point of it being open whether the “rational source” of what one understands might be ultimately identical with oneself on the noumenal level. See, for example, (Rosefeldt 2000; Longuenesse, 2017) here.

<sup>22</sup> For a recent defense of something like this conception of bare first-personal self-consciousness or “representing as subject”, see (Boyle 2023) although he would draw different implications. Some, perhaps following Williams’ critique of consequentialism, may wonder if the idea of the point of view of *practical reason as such* is so much as coherent. As we will see, there is a sense in which Kant agrees with this – for his view is that to realize itself practical reason must transition from this abstract point of view to the points of view of various particular rational agents.

*rational individual from another*, but rather one between *reason in general* (as an abstract and multiply realizable capacity) and the *particular rational individuals* that realize it.<sup>23 24</sup>

This is, to be sure, an issue that arises with respect to second-personal relations between individuals. But it also arises just as much with respect to my own first-personal relationship *to myself*. For the fundamental issue here has nothing to do with first- or second-personal relations *per se*. So, for example, Rödl is right to say that, according to Fichte and Hegel, “The moral law, as Kant understands it, is no relation of me to you.” (Rödl 2021) But it is equally true from this perspective that the moral law is *no relation of me to me* either – or, perhaps better, *no relation of a determinate me to a determinate me*.<sup>25</sup> In this sense, if there is a worry about Directedness here, it is one that arises just as much in the first-personal case as in the second-personal.<sup>26</sup>

On this reading, Kant’s moral theory is indeed subject to serious worries about alienation.<sup>27</sup> But the alienation that is most problematic is the alienation of you and me and every other determinate individual from *practical reason as such*. One advantage of a capacities-centric reading of Kant is that it helps to make sense of why such concerns seemed so gripping to the post-Kantians. Indeed, as we will see, a capacities-first reading of Kant could be seen as inviting a

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<sup>23</sup> Once again, see Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel in (Kierkegaard 1974, 278).

<sup>24</sup> Compare (Thompson 2004; Darwall 2006; Haase 2014; Zylberman 2018; Wallace 2019). Inspired by Stang’s work on metaphysical acosmism, we might call this the problem of “practical acosmism”, but “practical anti-individualism” seems a better label.

<sup>25</sup> To be clear, Rödl might ultimately agree on this point. Indeed, these thoughts in many ways push Kant in the direction of some of his recent work on the relationship between individuality and evil. If this is right, then the two species of alienation that (Samuel 2023) distinguishes – alienation from my own reasons and alienation from others and their reasons – are really two sides of one more fundamental phenomenon.

<sup>26</sup> Given this, it’s not second-personal relations *as such* that open the door to the importance of social life and relations for Hegel. Rather, for Hegel, social life matters because it – like life in general – provides a model for thinking about the logic of the relationship of *reason in general* to *particular rational individuals* in this sense. See (Khurana 2017; Novakovic 2017; Ng 2020) for important recent treatments of this topic. Once again, it is crucial to stress that the turn to the social or intersubjective is insufficient on its own to do the work that this requires for Hegel. According to Hegel at least, to think through these relationships we need to move beyond Spirit to Religion and its conception of a non-accidental unity of Spirit *and* Nature. Thanks to Tolley, McLear, and Stang for discussion here.

<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, though, I think “alienation” is not really the problem here. If Kant is right, the standards of practical reason characterize constraints on any fully comprehensible practical object or end. So the danger is less that this object will be *alien* to us and more that it will be so indeterminate as to be *meaningless*.

perspective on ethics that is closer to ethics of “no self” that is often associated with Buddhism than any sort of ethical individualism, even a qualified one like Hegel’s.<sup>28</sup> But, in any case, we won’t fully understand how Fichte and Hegel connect the first- and second-person if we miss these points. For both are only able to insist that the second-personal relations between subjects are necessary conditions on *self*-consciousness because they take the very possibility of relating to myself *as a determinate individual* to be constitutively connected to my second-personal relations with other determinate individuals.<sup>29</sup>

Given this, it is important not to conceive of this problem *merely* as a problem about the existence of “other minds” or “other agents”. Rather, even in the first-personal case, the Kantian faces the question of how to move from an abstract conception of practical reason *as such* to an understanding of that capacity as realized by a determinate rational individual. As this indicates, Fichte’s and Hegel’s worries about Kant here is less that Kant’s ethics fails to transcend the gap that separates one individual from another, and more that it fails to properly introduce such individuals *as separate* in the first place.

Once again, in a contemporary context, this is likely be a surprising claim. After all, in our post-Rawlsian world, Kantian ethics is often distinguished from consequentialism precisely by its emphasis on the moral significance of the “separateness of persons”.<sup>30</sup> But this way of presenting Kant’s moral theory tends to obscure just how difficult it is for Kant to explain how we can know that persons *really are separate* – to explain that is, how we know that the behavior we encounter in the phenomenal world really is the expression of a diverse collection of distinct moral subjects.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Indeed, some Buddhists use just this sort of language to express their views. See, for example, (Bommarito 2020). Of course, there will remain *many* other differences between this form of Kantianism and most forms of Buddhism.

<sup>29</sup> (Fichte 2000). For a helpful presentation of how Fichte conceives of the connection between these, see (McNulty 2016), although he takes these considerations to speak in favor of the centrality of the second-person to a degree I am questioning here.

<sup>30</sup> Compare Williams again: “if Kantianism abstracts in moral thought from the identity of persons, utilitarianism strikingly abstracts from their separateness.” (Williams 1981, 3)

<sup>31</sup> As we will see, this is closely connected to two further worries about Kant’s account: First, that it does not give appropriate weight to the diversity among different rational perspectives, and second, that it involves an overly hierarchical conception of the relationship between reason in general and the various features of me in particular that mark me out as different from other rational beings.

Such questions are especially challenging for Kant *in particular* because of his commitment to transcendental idealism, which locates the free rational agency of each of us on the level of things in themselves. As such, for Kant, the existence of other rational subjects is not something that can appear to us directly in empirical experience. Indeed, since our theoretical cognition or knowledge is limited to appearances, we can never have *theoretical cognition* or *knowledge* of the existence of free rational agents at all for Kant.<sup>32</sup> So, for example, while Kant will allow that the analogy between my body and other human bodies might provide me with some reason to think those other bodies are associated with other rational agents in the same way as mine seems to be, those reasons must be insufficient to provide me with genuine cognition or knowledge of the existence of other rational beings.<sup>33</sup>

To be clear, this does not mean that the Kantian should be a monist about the noumenal world, it only means that the questions about the individuation of persons in a moral sense must necessarily appear *radically indeterminate* from a theoretical point of view for Kant.<sup>34</sup> For this reason, if we are to have any basis for something like “knowledge” or (better) “belief” (*Glaube*) about such matters, for Kant that basis must be *primarily practical* in its origins.<sup>35</sup> For Kant, our primary reason for treating this or that piece of phenomenal behavior, or this or that phenomenal body, as expressing the free activity of one rational agent distinct from others, must be grounded in practical reason’s grasp of the moral law. This makes responding to the challenges we are considering a moral – and, indeed, political – problem for Kant. For Kant, moving from an understanding of practical reason *as such* to a conception of exactly how

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<sup>32</sup> One option here would be to move to a more thoroughly empirical or naturalized account of personal identity of the sort recently suggested by Longuenesse in (Longuenesse, 2017, 165) Interestingly, if we think of Buddhism as a form of naturalism, this might lead to a similar result to the line of thought I will be following here.

<sup>33</sup> I think Kant would, rightly or wrongly, reply in the same basic way to Burge’s suggestion that we have an *a priori* entitlement to attribute speech that we can understand, but that we have not ourselves produced, to an intelligent agent other than ourself. Compare (Sartre 2021)’s famous discussion of Kantian accounts of consciousness of the “the Other”, although note that he underestimates the practical resources available to Kant here.

<sup>34</sup> Kant is quite consistent in his rejection of Spinozism, although the exact grounds of his rejection of such views is the subject of much debate.

<sup>35</sup> Just how narrow the relevant sense of “practical” is. It may be that the relevant category here covers cases of both epistemic and practical normativity in some sense.

practical reason is realized in a community of distinct rational individuals is a central part of the more general moral project of making the abstract demands of the moral law determinate in the manner genuine practical wisdom requires.<sup>36</sup>

This might be thought to be another unappetizing consequence of Kant's transcendental idealism. But even if we relax the restrictions of transcendental idealism, it remains plausible that the project of determining *exactly* how rational subjects or individual spheres of responsibility should be individuated from one from another is in part a moral and political one. Thus, even outside the scope of Kant's particular philosophical commitments, it remains plausible that these questions are ones that can only be settled through an appeal to moral considerations. The boundaries of each rational individual's sphere of responsibility are not simply "given to us" by experience. They are something that must (at least in part) be constructed by us on moral and political grounds in something like the manner that characterizes Kant's (and Fichte's) treatment of the domain of right.<sup>37</sup>

This is an important locus of flexibility within any system of morality with this character, including a Kantian one. So, there is some reason to regard this as a potential advantage of Kantian ethics so interpreted.<sup>38</sup> But it will only be possible for the Kantian to arrive at such a result if the moral law, together with the other resources available to them, provides them with a suitable basis for drawing such distinctions between individuals. And this, in turn, will only be true if there is an *a priori* connection between the moral law and the individuation of distinct free agents.

Fortunately, the existence of such a connection is not itself implausible.<sup>39</sup> After all, as Locke famously observed, "person" is a "forensic term", which functions to track facts about moral

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<sup>36</sup> Once again, this is very much in line with Fichte's views, although not necessarily with the way his views are normally presented in relation to Kant's.

<sup>37</sup> Some evidence of this can be seen from the fact that the same basic questions arise even on readings of Kant that treatment transcendental idealism in more purely epistemic terms, like that in (Kraus 2020). As such examples, indicate, the basic issue here is not one that is tied to a practical interpretation of Kant's idealism.

<sup>38</sup> Not that this is always a good thing. For example, Kant's notorious discussion of passive citizenship might be read as exploiting something like this form of flexibility.

<sup>39</sup> See here (Schafer 2022).

responsibility and accountability. So, the moral law can provide us with a satisfying account of when someone is morally responsible for an action only if it provides us with a basis for making judgments about *which* noumenal agents are responsible for *which* parts of the phenomenal world.<sup>40</sup> And this is true, not just of judgments that are explicitly concerned with moral responsibility, or reward and punishment, but also of many of the most basic implications of morality for action. For example, we can only apply the moral law's command to keep our promises insofar as we can track which parts of the phenomenal world are expressions of which noumenal agent. So applying the moral law to even such basic cases will require some basis for making those sorts of judgments.<sup>41</sup>

For this reason, it is relatively plain that Kant's account of the moral law is workable *only* insofar as it provides us with some sort of guidance about when we should treat two pieces of phenomenal behavior as actions of the same noumenal agent. In my previous work on practical cognition of freedom in Kant, I've made use of these connections to argue for the following conditional: *If* Kant's account of the moral law is successful on its own terms, *then* it must provide us with a moral basis for making judgments about the identity and diversity of free noumenal agents of the sort that practical cognition of those individuals as free requires.<sup>42</sup> But while I continue to think that the moral law *must* be capable of playing this role for Kant's account to work as intended, we should also acknowledge that it is not at all obvious *how* it can. After all, while the moral law does tell us to respect the rationality of any rational subject we encounter, and while it does tell us to treat rational subjects as co-legislative members of a realm

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<sup>40</sup> Once again, it is plausible that something similar is true of our responsibility for beliefs, so the sense of "practical" at issue here must be broad enough to cover both these cases. See Kant's discussion of "imputation" at (6:224-8) for example.

<sup>41</sup> Indeed, it seems plausible that this is true, not just of speech acts like promises, but of public language more generally – insofar as it requires a sort of deontic scorekeeping. So the need for something to play this role goes very deep indeed. For this reason, I agree with Longuenesse that a workable Kantian account of moral personhood "depends on two equally indispensable components ... (1) being an empirically determined, persisting entity, conscious of its own numerical identity through time (person in the psychological sense); (2) having the capacity to prescribe the moral law to oneself, as the principle under which one's maxims are determined." (Longuenesse, 2017, 157)

<sup>42</sup> See again the discussion in (Schafer 2022).

of ends, neither of these on their own tell us anything about *how many* such rational subjects exist as *distinct individuals* or how such individuals are to be individuated.<sup>43</sup>

### The Perfection of Reason in the Species

In other words, taking some number of distinct rational individuals as given, it is relatively clear how Kant's moral theory would form a community out of them. In this sense, *pace* what Kant's critics often suggest, the Kantian moral law is a principle that *would bind together a given multiplicity of individuals* in relations of second-personal respect.<sup>44</sup> But this does not mean that there is not a deep problem here.

None of this should be especially surprising in the context of a reading that sees Kant as focused on the nature of reason *as a rational capacity*. For what this perspective suggests is that what matters most for the Kantian is not reason as realized in this or that *individual*, but rather as a general capacity.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, something very like this seems to be at work at times at times in Kant's own discussion. Consider, for example, the following important passage from the Idea essay:

In the human being (as the only rational creature on earth), **those predispositions whose goal is the use of his reason were to develop completely only in the species, but not in the individual.** Reason in a creature is a faculty of extending the rules and aims of the use of all its powers far beyond natural instinct, and **it knows no boundaries to its projects.** (IAG 8:18-19, my emphasis)

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<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, this would mean that Kant is closer to Sartre's conception of "the Other" as "beyond number" than Sartre himself recognized.

<sup>44</sup> In this sense, I agree with (Zylberman 2018)'s relational reading of the content of Kantian ethics, with two caveats: (i) there are only relations to be had here insofar as there are *relata* for them, and (ii) as indicated, such relations are themselves significant only insofar as they are part of larger systematic whole, which should no more be reduced to primitive relations than it should be reduced to primitive individuals.

<sup>45</sup> Compare (Setiya 2015)'s argument that the distinction between self and other could only matter in the manner many ethical theories assume if the first-personal mode of representation mattered practically in ways it cannot.



Kant's emphasis here on "reason in the species" suggests a view that focuses, not on *my* nature as one rational individual among many, but rather on the nature of *reason in general* in the "species" of human or even rational beings in general.<sup>46</sup> Kant suggests here that this focus is "necessary once one assumes that a species of animals should have reason, and, as a class of rational beings who all die, while the species is immortal, should nevertheless attain to completeness in the development of their predispositions." Thus, Kant concludes that it is really "in the species" that we can find the "progress in enlightenment" which "transform[s] the rude natural predisposition to make moral distinctions into determinate practical principles and hence ... into a moral whole".

Strikingly, Kant claims that this is a project with respect to which reason (in this general sense) "knows no boundaries" – suggesting that it might eventually lead to a form of reason that transcends *even* the limits of the critical philosophy itself. But more important now is that Kant seems here to take the tendency to *individuate ourselves* to itself have the function of promoting the self-development of reason in this more general sense:

The human being has an inclination to become socialized, since in such a condition he feels himself as more a human being, i.e. feels the development of his natural predispositions. But he also **has a great propensity to individualize (isolate) himself**, because he simultaneously encounters in himself the unsociable property of willing to direct everything so as to get his own way, and hence expects resistance everywhere because he knows of himself that he is inclined on his side toward resistance against others. (IAG 8:20-21, my emphasis)

Here, Kant seems to suggest that it is this drive of "reason in the species" that is the root of our tendency to treat each other as distinct rational individuals. If so, our very tendency to treat ourselves as such individuals might be best understood as part of a quasi-Hegelian process of

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<sup>46</sup> Here I read "species" to refer to the *generic class of rational beings in general* as opposed to a particular biological species. Nonetheless, note the relationship between such claims and Kant's views on race. My discussion here should indicate that those connections are not as marginal as some would suggest, even if I would myself resist attempts to read these passages solely in a narrowly biological fashion. For recent discussion, see (Rorty and Schmidt 2009; Kleingeld 2011; Lu-Adler 2023b; 2023a).

reason's own self-development. In this way, such passages suggest a picture of Kantian ethics quite different from the one we are familiar with. Gone, for example, is the foundational emphasis on the "separateness of persons" one finds in Rawls. And gone too is Korsgaard's quasi-existentialist emphasis on *individual self-constitution*, to be replaced with a proto-Hegelian focus on the self-development of *reason as a capacity*, which can be fully realized only in a future, rationally-ordered community.

But why, on this narrative, must practical reason divide itself into a community of distinct rational individuals in this way? Well, as noted above, for Kant, practical reason aims at a sort of practical wisdom that allows it to translate its abstract understanding of the moral law into patterns of action that realize various moral goods in a concrete form. Thus, to fulfill its aims, practical reason must arrive at some understanding of the moral law's implications in the actual world, and this understanding must determine a particular choice of action as a good response to one's circumstances. In this way, according to Kant, practical reason faces the task of making the abstract and formal requirements of the moral law determinate in the manner that moral action on that basis requires.<sup>47</sup> So, "practical reason as such" is compelled by its own ends to become something more than *mere* practical reason as such – to realize itself as practical reason in some more determinate form.<sup>48</sup>

This, in turn, will be possible only if practical reason can locate a source of "practical matter" that is compatible with the abstract form of the moral law – a source, that is, of more particular ends or values or projects or customs it can make use of to realize the moral law's highly abstract demands in some more determinate pattern of action in the world. For Kant at least, such "practical matter" can only be found in the messy (and essentially divided) empirical world – in our empirically conditioned desires and inclinations, our nature as a particular sort of rational animal, or the contingent conventions or customs within our society.<sup>49</sup> The important

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<sup>47</sup> Once again, this is central to understanding Kant's conception of right in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. This is one of the main themes of (Herman 2021), see also (Pallikkathayil 2010).

<sup>48</sup> See (Walden 2018). As (Sensen 2022) has argued, this shows that Kant was perfectly aware of the "empty formalism objection" to the moral law, but saw it as one of the problems that is constitutive of the project that faces practical reason in creatures like us.

<sup>49</sup> Interestingly some very non-Kantian theories of the emotions might be well-suited to play this role. See for example, D'Arms and Jacobson's recent "rational sentimentalism" on which emotions have a "narrow focus" that prioritizes "their goal" and a "prejudice for direct means". (106)

point at present is that all these potential sources of practical determinateness are themselves given to practical reason *in a divided and individualized form*. For example, empirical inclinations and desires come “bundled” by nature in living individuals with distinct living bodies. And the same is true of contingent human conventions or customs as well.<sup>50</sup> So, in our search for determinate content, we must, in effect, *divide practical reason so as to inform this practical matter*, which is given to us in a divided, particularized, and (indeed) mutually antagonistic form.<sup>51</sup>

On this way of retelling Kant’s account, the need to move from the standpoint of “practical reason in general” or “practical reason as such” to a plurality of distinct rational standpoints is a product of how reason must transform itself to bring its form to bear on a matter that is itself divided and particularized.<sup>52</sup> If this is right, then practical reason must acknowledge the “separateness of persons” because it is only by dividing itself into a multiplicity of rational individuals or perspectives that it can bring its characteristic systematic form (the moral law) to bear on the practical matter that is given to it.<sup>53</sup> Given this, when Williams famously writes that, “if Kantianism abstracts in moral thought from the identity of persons, utilitarianism ... abstracts from their separateness,” he is doubly misleading about the nature of the Kantian

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<sup>50</sup> This might be treated as contingent, or it might be viewed as essential to particularity itself that it be divided in this way (as Hegel would suggest).

<sup>51</sup> As Kant stresses, man has a great natural propensity towards a sort of “unsocial sociability” – an antagonism towards others that characterizes man’s natural inclinations and makes “it so that they cannot long subsist next to one another in wild freedom”. (IAG 8:22) Far from being an obstacle to the self-development of reason, Kant regards such propensities as positively necessary for it, at least in human beings. For it is only through such a “thoroughgoing antagonism” of the members of society towards one another that humanity is pushed towards the “development of all [its] predispositions”. (IAG 8:22) Once again, this is to see Kant through a quite Fichte-inflected lens, even though we are to some degree reading both authors against the current scholarly consensus here. But this also creates space for animals to be naturally included within the class of moral patients on a Kantian account. Once again, this seems to me to an obvious respect in which Kant’s particular moral prejudices clouded his ability to recognize the radical implications of his foundational ethical theory.

<sup>52</sup> As (Kraus 2020, 270) shows, this involves a process of “self-formation”, a “process of individuation through which a person develops in time into an individually determined mental whole – the fully realized individual person” – in accordance with the form provided by the rational idea of the soul.

<sup>53</sup> This is, in the first instance, a process via which the objects that these various perspectives cognize as good becomes more determinate. So in the first instance it is the object of practical cognition that is becoming more determinate and not the subject – for example, for all we have said here, the subject of each of these perspectives might remain an indeterminate ‘I’ that is, to use (Boyle 2023)’s phrase, merely represented as subject.

view. (Williams 1981: 3) For Kant, practical reason is interested in persons “as separate” *because* it is interested in their particularity or determinacy. So, Kantianism does not “abstract” from the particular identity of these individuals, even if the Kantian regards all such individuals as equally worthy of our respect. After all, to abstract away from those particular identities would be to abstract away from *precisely* what it is that led practical reason to treat them as morally separate in the first place.

### **The Bodhisattva of Königsberg?**

As already noted, this part of Kant’s story plainly anticipates elements that are more often associated with Hegel. So this Kant is very much a proto-Hegelian. But, at the same time, what we have described is only *proto*-Hegelian. For Hegel would of course insist that this version of Kantian ethics remains incomplete in crucial respects. And there does still seem to be *something* to this worry. For example, on this way of telling Kant’s story, it is the nature of practical reason *in general* that dictates how it progresses. For Kant, practical reason *as such* stands above the empirical world and makes use of it on practical reason’s own terms. In contemporary context, this will naturally raise worries about whether Kant’s attitude towards nature remains overly instrumental.

Similarly, one might also worry whether Kant’s conception of reason treats the diversity within rationality with the respect it deserves. On the story I have been sketching, the diversity within rationality arises out of an internal dynamic in reason in general – one which aims at reason’s self-development. So, on this story, any diversity between rational perspectives ultimately exists, in some sense, to serve the needs of *a form of reason which (in some sense) stands above such differences*. In this sense, one might worry that rational individuals do not matter in the right way on such an account, even if they do matter to some degree.

As noted above, for Hegel at least, such worries ultimately follow from a more general point – that genuine rational comprehension requires an understanding of concepts on which the individuals to which a concept applies are somehow *developed out of that very concept* – as opposed to confronting that concept from the outside. Once again, it is *this* that Hegel believes social life

(like life in general) helps to supply us with.<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, as we have just seen, this idea of reason as a self-individuating and self-organizing whole is hardly absent from Kant. Indeed, like many readers of Kant, Hegel seems to miss just how deeply this idea is *already* embedded within Kant's conception of reason *from the start*. For example, Hegel tends to see Kant's conception of self-organization primarily through the lens provided Kant's application of these ideas to the special case of *natural teleology*. So, like many readers, he tends to understate the degree to which Kant's conception of theoretical and practical reason is all along a conception of a *self-organizing teleological faculty*.<sup>55</sup>

Nonetheless, as we have seen, if reason must posit the existence of a multiplicity of individual rational beings, it seems relatively clear that the result of this will be, for Kant, not cognition or knowledge of such beings – but rather something like the sort of *practically- or morally-grounded belief or faith* in their existence as determinate particulars that characterizes our commitment to the existence of God.<sup>56</sup> To be clear, I think this has a good claim to be the orthodox Kantian position. So if we are aiming to interpret Kant's own views, I think this is where we should rest. Nonetheless it may seem to some of us as a rather flimsy basis for interpersonal morality. If so, we might find ourselves tempted to turn to other post-Kantians for assistance in developing a more radical reading of the implications of Kant's philosophy on this point – to some degree against Kant's own stated intentions.

One option would be to follow Kierkegaard down a proto-existentialist path.<sup>57</sup> But the most obvious post-Kantian to turn to in this context is someone else – namely, Schopenhauer, who famously claims that the fundamental lesson of Kant's philosophy is that the world of distinct

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<sup>54</sup> That having been said, I think the standard narrative about Hegel also overstates the degree to which something distinctively social is central to Hegel's response to this challenge.

<sup>55</sup> See Longuenesse's and Engstrom's work for example here.

<sup>56</sup> For a general discussion of what this would mean with respect to unconditioned, see (Schafer 2023). Once again, it is important to note that it is this aspect of Kant's philosophy (the nature of practical postulation or faith) that is the target of the culmination of Hegel's critique of Kant in the *Phenomenology*, which comes *only at the end* of the Spirit chapter, not before it.

<sup>57</sup> And Kierkegaard's presentation of the difficulties facing pure reason in this regard also fits very well with a capacities-first reading of Kant. I take it that this path would lead us towards the sort of existentialist metaethics that Dover and Gingerich find in Beauvoir and others have found in Sartre.

individuals is ultimately a fiction or an illusion in some sense.<sup>58</sup> Thus, for Schopenhauer, someone who has truly taken the lessons of Kant's theoretical philosophy to heart:

... sees through the *principium individuationis*, the veil of *maya*: and to this extent, he equates the essence outside of himself with his own ... He is aware that the difference between himself and others, which is so great a gulf for the evil person, belongs only to a fleeting and illusory appearance (Schopenhauer 2012, 66)

If what I have been saying here is correct, on these points Schopenhauer may have been more insightful about the fundamental implications of Kantian ethics than he took himself to be.<sup>59</sup> After all, while Schopenhauer was always keen to paint himself as the true heir of Kant's theoretical philosophy, he was also quick to heap scorn upon Kant's conception of the moral law. But if our discussion is correct, Schopenhauer's practical philosophy may be closer to Kant's, at least in certain respects, than Schopenhauer realized.<sup>60</sup>

In particular, we have seen that at least certain elements in Kant's practical philosophy may be closer to Schopenhauer's appropriation of an ethics of "no-self" from South Asian philosophy than we might have expected.<sup>61</sup> If this is right, it helps to vindicate Schopenhauer's conception of Spinoza's and Kant's philosophy as pointing towards a grand synthesis of central elements of

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<sup>58</sup> As Marshall has pointed out to me, Schopenhauer's views on this score are more complicated than they might seem – and seem to allow for some sort of distinction between me and you that transcends the limits of appearances. Nonetheless, passages like the ones above make it clear that any such distinction must ultimately fall away at the most metaphysically fundamental level for Schopenhauer.

<sup>59</sup> Compare Hegel's description of the transformation of Kantian moral philosophy into vague romanticism: "The harmony is an other-worldly beyond of consciousness, lying somewhere off in a foggy distance in which there is no longer anything which can be accurately differentiated or comprehended, since the comprehension of this unity, which we just attempted to provide, itself failed." (PS 622)

<sup>60</sup> For discussion of this aspect of Schopenhauer's ethics in relationship to Kant, see (Marshall 2018). But contrast (Shapshay 2020), which, if I'm right, misses the degree to which the more radical reading is already at work in Kant.

<sup>61</sup> Obviously, there are also interesting connections here with other traditions. For some of this history, see Ware's recent work on these topics.

the Western and South Asian philosophical traditions.<sup>62</sup> Crucially, this sort of “selfless Kantianism” would not necessarily need to follow Schopenhauer in treating this underlying ethical reality as *fundamentally irrational*. For example, there no reason to think that a selfless form of practical reason would be governed by something other than the moral law. So, such a view could (for all we’ve said) continue to regard ethics as a fundamentally rational enterprise. Nor would it have to follow Schopenhauer (and at least certain forms of Buddhism) in thinking of the world of appearances as fundamentally characterized by suffering. Rather, in keeping with Kant’s conception of the highest good, it might see reason as aiming, not to transcend the empirical world, but rather to transform it by bringing it into the right sort of relationship with reason’s understanding of the good.<sup>63</sup>

On both these scores, this form of selfless Kantianism might make room for a much more optimistic view of the world than Schopenhauer’s. This might raise a different worry about such a view – namely, that such a “selfless Kantianism” must collapse into some form of consequentialism. But such a collapse will only be a danger if the “separateness of persons” is what *really* separates Kantianism from consequentialism. And it seems likely the fundamental issue between these views is actually something more abstract – for example, whether practical reason is primarily concerned with the “production of consequences” in the first place, or whether the sort of *aggregation* that is characteristic of classical forms of consequentialism can produce the sort of *systematic unity* practical reason seeks for Kant. If the answer to these questions is no, the sort of unity that characterizes Kant’s conception of “reason in the species of rational beings” will be quite different than the sort of unity involved in the “aggregation of utils” within a consequentialist framework. One way to see this is to focus on a single individual and ask whether this sort of aggregation would produce the sort of systematic unity *within that individual* that Kant is interested in. I take it that it clearly would not, and yet the “separateness of persons” cannot be what explains *this* difference.<sup>64</sup> Once again, the crucial point here is that a system is something very different from a mere aggregate.

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<sup>62</sup> See here the appropriation of Spinoza’s arguments by (Johnston 2011). This would, of course, go against Kant’s own understanding of his relationship to such views. So this would be, in many ways a reading of Kant against Kant’s intentions. (See, e.g., 8:335-6)

<sup>63</sup> Thanks to Calvin Baker for discussion of some of the complexities here.

<sup>64</sup> Compare here, in a very different context, (Berker 2013).

Nor would this sort of “selfless Kantianism” necessarily need to join Schopenhauer in positively affirming that there are *not* metaphysically distinct selves or subjects on the fundamental level of reality. Rather, it would be more Kantian to simply leave one’s commitments about such questions as *indeterminate* as possible – to treat, that is, the individuation of such “noumenal selves” as something as lying outside our cognitive reach. Indeed, we have already seen reason to question whether *even* such a “selfless” form of Kantian ethics would do away with the notion of distinct individual selves as an essential part of ethical thought *on a non-fundamental level*. For Kant seems to share with Hegel some version of the idea that the self-development of reason “in the species” requires us to posit the existence of variety of distinct rational individuals – perhaps because this is just what reason’s distinctive form of systematic unity requires, given the empirical matter it confronts. So, even if we regard such individuals as a sort of rational posit, it might be the case that they play an essential role in the practical point of view that reason requires of us at this stage of its own self-development.<sup>65</sup> That is, it might be that reason’s own internal self-development requires it to treat itself as if it were divided up into a multiplicity of distinct individuals, even though these divisions are ultimately superficial, both metaphysically and (in some sense) ethically.<sup>66</sup>

If so, the “separateness of persons” would represent an essential element in Kantian ethics. But only as a necessary stage in reason’s self-development. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to try to “look beyond” this in the manner that Schopenhauer at least sometimes seems to.<sup>67</sup> This last point is especially important with respect to the natural worry that a focus on “reason in the species” or “reason in general” might have dangerously totalitarian implications.<sup>68</sup> For even if the Kantian comes to doubt that there is an *absolute separateness of persons* on the most fundamental ethical level, the self-development of reason might require one to act as though reason is realized by a multiplicity of ethically distinct persons. If so, this might provide an

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<sup>65</sup> Unsurprisingly, given Schopenhauer’s interest in both, there would be deep resonances between this form of Kantianism and Hume’s conception of the ethical significance of the self. This might fit well with the sort of account of Kant’s idea of the soul developed recently by (Kraus 2020).

<sup>66</sup> Compare Street’s treatment of Humean forms of constructivism in a Buddhist context.

<sup>67</sup> Again, the degree to which Schopenhauer’s ethics does demand this is a hotly debated topic in the scholarly literature.

<sup>68</sup> A worry that goes at least back to Schiller’s reaction to Kant.



alternative route towards recovering much of the content that is traditionally associated with the “separateness of persons” in ethics.

On such a view, the “separateness of persons” would be an expression of a stage in reason’s self-development that requires reason to treat itself as fragmented into separate rational beings. Interestingly, like Rawls’s political liberalism, this would disconnect our justification for positing an ethical “separateness of persons” from metaphysical claims about personal identity. In this sense, the ultimate result of this line of thought might be a return to Rawls’s conception of how the “separateness of persons” is best justified in the non-metaphysical context of political liberalism. Of course, the present account would go beyond Rawls to offer a further story about how the nature and significance of practical reason (as a capacity) supports this idea. But nonetheless the resulting view would be well suited to be part of a Rawlsian overlapping consensus – and to a perspective that sees these issues as ones that can only be resolved in part through political means. If so, this would provide us with an illustration of how a sort of hyper-rationalist romanticism about practical reason, like Thomas Nagel’s, might be compatible with a modest and Rawlsian conception of political liberalism.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Indeed, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to imagine that Rawls himself might at times have been attracted to this combination of views. See, for example, the nod to Spinoza in the final paragraph of *A Theory of Justice*: “... to see our place in society from the perspective of this position is to see it *sub specie aeternitatis*: it is to regard the human situation not only from all social but also from all temporal points of view.” (514)

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