KANT, VICE, AND GLOBAL POVERTY

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Published version in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice,* 26, no. 2 (April 2023): 271-286

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that within Kantianism, widespread indifference of the global rich to the suffering of the global poor should be understood as resulting at least partly from vice. Kant had much more to say about vice than is often recognized, and it forms a crucial part of his moral anthropology. Kantians should thus attend to the ways in which vice functions as a practical obstacle to fulfilling duties of beneficence. In vice-fueled indifference, inclinations associated with self-love and self-conceit work their way into our wills, interfering with our moral commitments by impeding our ability to recognize moral requirements and our motivation to act on them. Vice distorts our reasoning in ways that promote self-deception and rationalization about the extent to which we are fulfilling moral demands. Kantian vice also has social dimensions. I argue that widespread indifference exacerbates our individual vices through social norms and practices that legitimize ignoring the needs of others. I conclude by offering some potential remedies to indifference within the Kantian framework.

Accepted Manuscript

The vices, the brood of dispositions opposing the law, are the monsters he has to fight.[1]

It might be thought that Kantianism is of little use when it comes to talking about solutions to global poverty. It might also be thought that Kantianism is of little use when it comes to talking about vice. In this paper, I hope to show that both these thoughts are mistaken. Instead, I will argue that Kant's insights about vice are useful for thinking about what I shall describe as a widespread indifference to global poverty on the part of most wealthy people. In this paper, I will largely take for granted that most of us are falling short when it comes to the

[1] *Doctrine of Virtue,* 405. This and all future references to Kant's works will employ the Prussian Academy pagination.

obligation to alleviate the sufferings of others. My focus here will be on how this very common moral failure should be understood within Kant's overall moral theory.

Kant does not, I think, get enough credit among moral philosophers for his sensitivity to the nuances of moral life, or for his attention to empirical moral psychology. More than many philosophers, Kant is attuned to the challenges we face in getting ourselves to do what we should. This makes him especially interesting when it comes to grappling with the general failure of those of us who live privileged lives in the global north to do much to remedy the situation of desperate people in other parts of the world.

That widespread failure is standardly discussed in terms of moral duties, demands, and obligations. This makes sense within Kantianism, since Kantian duties like justice and beneficence can readily be harnessed to explain what is morally wrong with neglecting the true needs of others. In this paper, however, I will be taking up a rather different angle on the problem, namely, the standpoint of moral character. In particular, I will argue that from a Kantian standpoint, our inadequate responses to global poverty should be understood not simply as failures of justice or beneficence, but also as manifestations of vice. Kant had much more to say about vice than many people realize. Indeed, he seemed to think that ridding ourselves of vices is more than half the battle when it comes to fulfilling our moral duties and cultivating our good wills. It stands to reason that a Kantian account of our failures with respect to justice or beneficence ought to consider the role that vice plays in those failures. Vice, on Kant's view, warps our moral capacities, generating a distorted picture of our moral situation and its demands on us. Correcting this distortion is essential for being able to recognize and act on the demands of duty.

In focusing on vice, I do not mean to downplay the importance of Kantian duties in articulating our obligations to remedy extreme poverty. It seems likely that a world that abided by Kant's duties of justice would be a far different world from our own. Likely it would require a much more egalitarian distribution of basic resources essential for meeting the true needs of all rational agents. It also seems likely that much of our consumer behavior runs afoul of Kantian duties not to engage in the exploitation of others or lend financial support to those who do. In other words, it is possible to generate a deep and broad Kantian criticism of the world's current distribution of resources without talking about vice.

But by bringing Kant's account of vice to bear on discussions of global poverty, we expand and enrich the explanatory power of his picture of moral failure. On this fuller Kantian picture, moral failure is not simply a matter of neglecting to perform our duties. It is a failure to become a certain kind of person, specifically one who is adequately attuned and responsive to the needs of others. This shift in perspective has normative implications for how, within Kantianism, we should evaluate ourselves and our ongoing commitments and ways of life.

As we will see, Kant is well aware that our reasoning is often self-serving. He thinks we have natural propensities that foster self-deception and rationalization about our moral obligations and the extent to which we are living up to them. This means that it is all too easy for us to convince ourselves that we are morally better people than we are, and that we are fulfilling the requirements of duties like justice and beneficence when in fact we are not. Vice, as Kant understands it, facilitates and exacerbates these propensities. It infiltrates our reasoning, distorting our judgments and allowing us to think of ourselves as caring and compassionate rather than selfish and indifferent. As Kant sees it, cultivating a good will involves us in what is usually a constant battle against vice. I will argue that appreciating the role that vice plays in our

moral life is important to understanding Kant's account of moral failure, particularly as it applies to the duty of beneficence. We fail to be adequately beneficent in part because we are prone to vices that obscure those failures and render us indifferent to the sufferings of other people and our own obligations to them.

Let me pause to say something about what I mean by 'indifference' in this context. I intend it to mean a general failure to respond adequately to the needs, rights, or reasonable demands of others.[2] In this sense, indifference need not imply apathy, as it often does in ordinary usage. While it is true that some people remain entirely unmoved by the plight of desperate people, I suspect that most of us have a different problem. We are moved, but inadequately so. We are willing to donate money or time, but not very much and not very often. We also convince ourselves that we are less culpable and more generous than we are. This may not be quite what most people have in mind when they think of indifference, but I think it makes sense to see indifference as representing a spectrum of attitudes and responses. We can be more or less moved by someone's plight, more or less responsive to their suffering, more or less willing to sacrifice in order to remedy it. To be indifferent in this sense is simply to fall short of an adequate commitment to our obligations. Although I think it is possible to be indifferent to our own needs, I will focus here on indifference to the needs of others.[3]

This paper will be structured as follows. I will begin with a brief overview of the standard Kantian picture of our duties to alleviate poverty, a picture that focuses primarily on the requirements of justice and beneficence. It is this standard Kantian picture that I want to complicate and, I hope, enrich with considerations of vice. This is because in Kantian terms, vice

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[2] For another account of indifference, see Lillehammer, "The Nature and Ethics of Indifference"

[3] For instance, we might describe the person with the Kantian vice of servility as indifferent to their own moral standing and its implications.

can play a major role in whether and how we fulfill the requirements of duty. I will then turn to Kant's account of vice and its distorting effects on our moral reasoning, focusing especially on how it shapes our judgments about the demands of beneficence. Crucially, Kantian vice has social dimensions, insofar as various social norms and practices can encourage and normalize it. I will conclude with a brief discussion of the practical upshot of this expanded Kantian picture for which I have been arguing. Insofar as it illuminates some of the obstacles we face in the effort to respond appropriately to global poverty, it may also point us in the direction of removing them.

The question of what morality requires of us when it comes to responding to the dire needs of other people is, of course, a large and controversial one. Some moral theories, like utilitarianism, seem to place quite stringent demands on us.[4] Kantianism is standardly interpreted as rather less demanding than utilitarianism, although there is considerable debate within Kantianism about what exactly it does demand.[5] Because my interest in this paper is with the ways in which we fail to live up to whatever demands exist, I will mostly set aside the details of that debate. However we settle the question of what Kantian beneficence demands of us, it is likely that most of us are failing to meet those demands most of the time, even when we take ourselves to be committed to the end. I will take the fact of our failure for granted so that I can focus on the reasons for it. Even so, it will be helpful to begin with a general outline of how Kantianism directs us to think about the needs of others, particularly in relationship to our own.

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[4] Peter Singer famously makes this case in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," although not in explicitly utilitarian terms.

[5] See, for instance, Herman, "The Scope of Moral Requirement"; Formosa and Sticker, "Kant and the Demandingness of the Virtue of Beneficence"; Pinheiro Walla, "Kant's Moral Theory and Demandingness"; Moran, "Demandingness, Indebtedness, and Charity: Kant on Imperfect Duties to Others."

Within Kantianism, it seems plausible to say that remedying poverty is a duty of justice that we owe to others as a matter of their right.[6] Although there are important questions about the nature and extent of this duty, as well as its applicability to citizens of other states, I will set them aside for purposes of this paper. Instead, I will focus primarily on the ways in which remedying poverty counts as fulfilling a duty of virtue, more specifically as a fulfillment of the duty of beneficence. Although the claim I will be making about how vice interferes with our reasoning about our duties might also apply to our duties of justice, I will argue for that claim only in the context of beneficence.

The Kantian duty of beneficence is an imperfect duty, meaning that it is a duty to adopt an end or take up a commitment, rather than a duty to perform or refrain from performing a specific action.[7] While adopting the general end of beneficence is strictly obligatory, Kant is clear that we have latitude when it comes to choosing courses of action that fulfill the end. This is in part because within Kant's system, imperfect duties must give way to perfect duties. To take a familiar example, I cannot permissibly save your life by methods that require me to impermissibly take the life of another, as I would be doing if I killed someone to make their organs available for transplant into you. The sheer volume of possible actions that we could perform under the auspices of beneficence also points to the need for latitude. Obviously I cannot meet every need of every rational being. That alone suggests that I will have to make some choices about which acts of beneficence I take on and which I decline.

Kant himself is not entirely clear about exactly how much latitude we have when it comes to declining to help others in need, or what would count as a sufficiently good reason for

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[6] On the extent and methods of state poverty relief, see Holtman, "Kantian Justice and Poverty Relief" and Allais, "What Properly Belongs to Me."

[7] See Hill, "Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation"

declining to help.[8] He is explicit in saying that we are not obligated to sacrifice our "true needs" for others, even if doing so would be necessary to meet their true needs. (It might even be wrong for me to sacrifice my true needs for another, if in doing so I fail to treat myself with adequate respect.) Regarding the duty to sacrifice our welfare for another person, he says "how far it should extend depends, in large part, on what each person's true needs are in virtue of his sensibilities, and it must be left to each to decide this for himself."[9] This passage suggests that there is a considerable role for individual judgment in decisions about how the duty of beneficence is to be fulfilled. Although the judgment must presumably be responsive to rational assessments of our own true needs and the true needs of others, there is at least some sense in which I get to decide what beneficence will look like in my own life. I must take up the commitment, but there are a variety of ways in which I can express that commitment consistent with having adopted the end.

The Kantian duty of beneficence covers a very wide terrain, including everything from dangerous rescue operations to minor favors like collecting a vacationing neighbor's mail. Barbara Herman draws a distinction between the duty of mutual aid, which she sees as grounded in morally necessary relationships of reciprocity among vulnerable beings, and what she describes as the virtues of kindness or benevolence.[10] Although this distinction is useful in distinguishing between more and less pressing opportunities for beneficence, I have elsewhere argued that resting the duty of beneficence on true needs is a mistake.[11] Rather, we should

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[8] Against Hill, David Cummisky has argued that the duty of beneficence leaves very little space for latitude. See Cummiskey, *Kantian Consequentialism* for the criticism and Hill, "Meeting Needs and Doing Favors" for a response.
[9] DV 393
[10] Herman's main argument is in "Mutual Aid and Respect for Persons" but she expands on it in "The Scope of Moral Requirement"
[11] [Redacted for review]

interpret the wide duty of beneficence as implying a narrow duty not to be indifferent to others. On my interpretation of the duty, helping is obligatory when it is the only way not to be indifferent to others.

Shifting to talk about a requirement not to be indifferent to others is useful, I think, because it enables us to see beyond specific actions and omissions and focus instead on what are often entrenched patterns of reasoning and response that give rise to those actions and omissions.[12] More specifically, it helps us see that in order to fulfill the general imperfect duty of beneficence, we must be on guard against the vices that make it difficult for us to recognize and live up to its demands. This doesn't mean that that Kantians should stop emphasizing the specific actions that are required by beneficence. Rather, the point is that we must also work to identify the obstacles to beneficence that we routinely face and the role that vice plays in generating those obstacles. It is only by understanding the way in which vice shapes our reasoning about our duties that we can fully appreciate how indifference operates and how it leads us to fail at beneficence.

Consider a fairly common scenario. Imagine a community of people living in comfortable circumstances in the global north. They worry about climate change and take some measures to reduce their consumption of fossil fuels, but they continue to drive cars, take airplanes to conferences and vacation spots, and heat and cool their homes to comfortable levels. They reduce their meat consumption and shop locally when it is convenient, but they also drink imported wine and eat inefficiently shipped, out-of-season produce. They buy fair-trade goods when they can and they give what they and most others around them would regard as generous amounts of money to organizations like Oxfam. And so on.

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[12] On this, see Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, especially Chapter 7.

I will take for granted that these actions are insufficient as responses to climate change and other forces exacerbating the suffering of impoverished people. They are likely to have little effect on the world. Nor do they require particularly dramatic sacrifices to anyone's existing way of life. Crucially for my purposes, while the people performing such actions may quite sincerely profess to care deeply about the fates of others around the world, they standardly live and behave in ways that are not all that distinguishable from people who have made no such profession.[13] So while there is a sense in which such people (and I count myself among them) are committed to beneficence, there is also a sense in which that commitment is deeply inadequate in ways that are often opaque to them (us). I want to suggest that Kantians trying to pinpoint the source of this inadequate commitment would do well to look to Kant's account of vice.

Although he talks about vice frequently, Kant does not present a systematic account of it, Broadly speaking, Kantian vice is a state in which our will is determined by bad principles. In the *Doctrine of Virtue,* Kant describes the acquisition of vice this way: "The calm with which one gives oneself up to [a lasting inclination] permits reflection and allows the mind to form principles upon it and so, if inclination lights up on something contrary to the law, to brood upon it, to get it rooted deeply, and so to take up what is evil into its maxim. And the evil is then *properly* evil, that is, a true *vice*"[14]

It is not easy (and for my purposes, not especially important) to distinguish Kant's account of vice from his account of evil. Jeanine Grenberg identifies what is described as vice in the *Doctrine of Virtue* with what is described in the *Religion* as an "evil power of choice," defining vice as "a state in which one's inclinations against the moral law become established as

[13] Obviously people who do not care at all about the fate of others around the world are engaged in a major failure of beneficence. Arguably, they have not adopted the end at all. My interest here is in those of us who have adopted the end in some sense, but who do not act in ways consistent with it.
[14] DV 408

the ground of maxims guiding one's actions and dispositions."[15] To be in the grip of vice is to have chosen certain inclinations as one's guiding principles, subordinating moral considerations to those inclinations as a matter of policy. Crucially, it is not the inclinations themselves that constitute vice. What matters is the role we give those inclinations in our reasoning about what to do.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason,* Kant divides inclinations into the categories of self-love and self-conceit.[16] Inclinations associated with self-love are, roughly speaking, inclinations to benefit ourselves, whereas inclinations associated with self-conceit are inclinations to feel satisfied with ourselves, which in turn often stems from the desire to feel superior to others. Kant says that morality must constrain self-love, but that it must strike down self-conceit altogether. This is because while pursuing our own ends is compatible with having morality as the principle of the will, the desire to feel superior to others is not. We can pursue the inclinations of self-love in a way that does not subordinate morality to those inclinations. Self-conceit, however, cannot merely be constrained, since it is fundamentally at odds with the moral equality of others that the categorical imperative requires us to acknowledge.

Although we normally think of failures to aid others in terms of excessive pursuit of self-love, or overvaluation of our own interests in comparison with others, self-conceit plays a role as well. This is because self-conceit motivates us to engage in self-serving reasoning about the extent of our own failures. It turns vice into an especially stealthy opponent. As Grenberg says, "in accepting [vice] as the ultimate enemy of virtue, we move from an image of combat to one of

[15] Grenberg, "What is the Enemy of Virtue?" p. 157.
[16] *Critique of Practical Reason,* 5:73.

collaboration; one does not so much reject morality as one finds for it an agreeable, lesser place within its own domain of reason-giving."[17]

This picture of vice as an enemy collaborator is useful because it highlights the way in which Kantian vice can be insidious. It is easy to deceive ourselves into thinking we are reasoning morally when we are not. Moral considerations need not be absent from the vicious person's mind or heart; as Grenberg says, we may simply find an "agreeable, lesser place" for them in our reasoning. Vice does not always feel like a battle against unruly inclinations, which is why it can be so hard for us to recognize in ourselves. The enemy can infiltrate our reasoning without our being fully aware of it. This is why it is so dangerous.

It may be helpful here to draw a comparison between Kant's conception of vice and its better-known analogue in Aristotle. Kant, alas, mischaracterizes Aristotle's account when he discusses it in *Doctrine of Virtue*.[18] He focuses on the doctrine of the mean, rejecting the idea that vices represent the extremes of a single spectrum, along which virtue lies as well. But for Aristotle, vice is not simply an excess or deficiency of some action or feeling that it is possible to have in the right amount. To think of vice this way is to miss the crucial role of practical wisdom in Aristotle's picture. There is an important sense in which the vicious person and the virtuous person do not see the world in the same way. The cowardly, brave, and rash persons all recognize when they are in a situation that endangers them, but they make different judgments about when endangering oneself is worthwhile. These differences have both cognitive and affective dimensions. The cowardly person is too attached to his physical safety, while the rash person is too little attached to it. These disordered attachments interfere with their respective capacities for judgment, rendering them both incapable of seeing the situation as the brave

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[17] Grenberg, p. 158.
[18] DV 404

person does. To the cowardly person, the brave person looks rash; to the rash person, she appears cowardly. Aristotle does not offer much hope that the vicious people will be capable of correcting their perceptions. To have an Aristotelian vice is to have a form of largely intractable ignorance.

Vice, for Kant, is not quite so intractable. All rational beings have it within their power to act in accordance with the categorical imperative, and so whatever vice does by way of warping our thinking, it cannot completely prevent us from recognizing the demands of morality. But Kantian vice also has dispositional elements that are not easily or quickly eradicated. Vice cannot be reduced to an act of will, and presumably it cannot be entirely remedied by an act of will either.

There are ways in which Kantian vice resembles both Aristotelian vice and also its close neighbor, *akrasia*. On Aristotle's picture, the vicious person does not know he is vicious. The *akratic* person knows that she is akratic, at least when whatever tempts her to act against her judgment is sufficiently far from view. Kantian vice is both receptive to reason in the way that *akrasia* is, but also resistant to it in ways that make it resemble Aristotelian vice. Kant seems to think we are capable of recognizing vice and working to eliminate it as far as we can. In this respect, Kantian vice is more like *akrasia* than Aristotelian vice. But like Aristotelian vice, Kantian vice is a perversion of moral judgment, rather than simply a lapse in it. It infiltrates our reasoning in ways that make it difficult to recognize and eradicate. Vice shapes our perceptions of the world, often without our realizing it.

As we have seen, Kant regards beneficence as a wide imperfect duty, requiring judgment when it comes to figuring out the specific ways in which we are to fulfill it in the course of our daily lives. A commitment to beneficence has to be compatible with exercising latitude, meaning

that it must be permissible to subordinate the duty of beneficence to other considerations, at least on occasion. And yet, there are obviously better and worse ways of making judgments about the demands of beneficence in light of other non-moral considerations, such as my desire to pursue my own ends. My claim is that vice leads us to make those judgments badly, but in ways that we do not always recognize. Vice skews our attitudes in ways that promote self-deception and rationalization, allowing us to justify pursuing our own ends in morally indefensible ways or to a morally indefensible extent. It enables us to believe that we are fulfilling the demands of beneficence fairly well when we are in fact falling short. This is why avoiding indifference and the vice that gives rise to it is necessary in order for us to reason well about what the duty of beneficence demands.

Kant is well aware of the many ways in which we can get beneficence wrong. In his remarks about practical and pathological sympathy, we can feel his impatience with people who wail and grind their teeth about the plight of others (pathological) while failing to do anything useful to remedy that plight (practical). Acts of beneficence can also be intrusive or overbearing, or be a way of "reveling in moral feelings," or of gaining a superior position over someone.[19] When the aim of beneficence is not to help the other person, but to satisfy our own needs and desires, then we are not in fact fulfilling the demands of beneficence as Kant understands them. The action may be the right one, but the reasoning about the action reflects self-love and self-conceit, not concern with the ends of a fellow rational being.

There is little question that unconstrained self-love interferes with our commitment to beneficence. Kant himself had considerable sympathy with the Stoic valorization of independence from material goods. We have compelling moral reason to make ourselves as

[19] DV 453.

immune as possible to feelings of denial and deprivation, and to be capable of cheerfully going without many of life's comforts. Indeed, we can well imagine Kant criticizing the people who worry about global warming but also like to wake up to a heated kitchen and hot coffee grown from imported beans. Indifference to the needs of others may be partly explained by inadequate indifference to our own discomfort.

We might think that the person who overvalues his own comfort is simply akratic. Suppose he believes he should keep his heater set to a certain low temperature so as not to waste energy, but then is quick to turn it up as soon as he starts feeling cold. If he is aware that he is acting against his better moral judgment, then akrasia might be the right diagnosis. Kant, however, worries that we too easily slide into patterns of reasoning that enable us to justify the actions that promote our own comfort. It is not simply that comfort is the guiding principle of the will of the person who turns up the heat whenever he feels cold. It is also that he is prone to convincing himself that his behavior is somehow justified in a way that makes it compatible with his commitment to fighting climate change. This is how vice functions as an enemy collaborator. It distorts our reasoning and encourages us to think that what is in fact unbridled pursuit of self-interest is consistent with being thoroughly beneficent. The problem is not simply that we choose hot coffee and warm kitchens over helping people and fighting climate change. The problem is also with how we justify these choices to ourselves in terms that enable us to sleep soundly at night, feeling secure in our own moral merit.

Vice can be particularly stealthy at distorting our reasoning in situations where we correctly believe ourselves to be committed to the right kinds of ends. (The coffee! It's organic, fair-trade, shade-grown, sustainably harvested, *and* packaged in recyclable materials!) This is why we cannot explain vice-fueled indifference merely as unconstrained self-love. The person

who willingly pays twice as much for ethical coffee *is* constraining her self-interest, and moreover, is doing so for the right reasons. It is not quite right to describe her as acting from pure selfishness or a total disregard for moral demands. In order to see what else might be going on, it will be helpful to draw on Kant's account of self-conceit.

Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* contains a brilliant scene that illustrates the way that vice, by infiltrating our thinking, encourages our propensities to self-conceit as well as self-love. In the scene, John and Fanny Dashwood are discussing what to do with a large inheritance that John Dashwood has just received from his father. The Dashwoods are already wealthy; John Dashwood's stepmother and three half-sisters are not. The late Mr. Dashwood had entreated his son to take care of his sisters, and John Dashwood promised to do so. At the beginning of the scene, he has resolved on giving them each one thousand pounds. The cold-hearted and greedy Fanny works to dissuade him, and John is all too happy to go along. They gradually talk themselves down to five hundred pounds, then to a small annuity, then to an occasional present of fifty pounds, and finally to nothing more than some assistance in moving house.

Fanny ensures her victory by suggesting to her husband that his father loved his sisters more than him and would have left the entire estate to them if the law had made that possible. John, a weak-minded man susceptible to jealousy, is quick to take up this view:

> This argument was irresistible. It gave to his intentions whatever of decision was wanting before; and he finally resolved, that it would be absolutely unnecessary, if not highly indecorous, to do more for the widow and children of his father, than such kind of neighbourly acts as his own wife pointed out.[20]

It is evident to the reader that John should have given them the original three thousand pounds, if not considerably more. John is initially aware of this, but with Fanny's assistance, he manages to talk himself into an entirely different perspective on the situation. He ends up taking the absurd

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[20] Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, p. 13.

view that it would be inappropriate for him to help them with the cash that they quite obviously need and that they have no way of obtaining for themselves.

John Dashwood's beliefs are patently false, but the process by which he came to them is revelatory about what it means to be in the grip of Kantian vice. With Fanny's help, John has convinced himself that beneficence does not require him to help his relatives and indeed, that he would be acting wrongly if he did. This obviously serves their self-interest. Morality is failing to constrain self-love properly here. But Fanny, worried that morality might yet prevail over self-interest in John's psychology, cleverly draws out inclinations tied to self-conceit as well. She convinces John not only that he needs the money that should go to his sisters, but that he deserves to keep it.

It is not hard to find parallels between the Dashwoods and ourselves. Many of us harbor a background belief that our social and economic positions are earned, that our wealth is due to our own merit and perhaps also to the merit of our parents and grandparents or our fellow citizens. We may even believe that people suffering from poverty are at fault for their situation. These beliefs, of course, ought to be called into question, but we resist doing so. This is not just because calling them into question forces us to sacrifice more than we would like. It is also because it disrupts, sometimes quite subtly, our conviction that our wealth reflects our rightful place in the world. It is this conviction that introduces an element of self-conceit into our reasoning.

Fanny Dashwood's efforts to talk her husband out of giving his sisters money succeed not simply because they appeal to his self-interest. He seems at least somewhat aware that he in fact would not miss the money in his regular expenses. What really tips the argument in her favor is her jab at his pride, at his feeling of being less favored by his father and so more entitled to the inheritance. At this point, his self-interest becomes tied up with his self-conceit in ways that

imbibe his self-interest with a feeling of righteousness. And this is how vice becomes, in Grenberg's terms, a collaborator rather than a combatant.

The inclinations that give rise to the vices that fuel indifference are inclinations to favor my own interests over those of others and also inclinations toward moral smugness whenever I do something that I can reasonably represent to myself as beneficent. The first kind of inclination stems from self-love and the second stems from self-conceit, but in practice, they are often deeply intertwined. The person who fails at beneficence is excessively attached to her own ends and insufficiently attached to the ends of other people. This distorts her ability to judge their needs properly in light of her own. She may also be attached to the representation of herself as a beneficent person, a representation that feeds her self-conceit because of the way in which it sets her over those she helps.

None of this need be very close to the surface of her psyche in order for it to play a role in how she deliberates. She may, as I have said, regard herself as fully committed to the imperfect duty of beneficence. But she nevertheless prioritizes her own ends and rationalizes it in terms of what she deserves and what contributions she is already making to the welfare of others (e.g., believing that one deserves expensive coffee and can feel good about buying it because it is fair-trade). Her sense of moral self-satisfaction interferes with her ability to deliberate well about what beneficence in fact requires of her. It is not that it doesn't matter whether her coffee is fair-trade; presumably it is better than buying coffee with dubious origins. But the self-satisfaction she experiences in buying it enables the agent to engage in self-deception about her own moral state and the depth of her moral commitments. This is why she can be indifferent while believing herself to be beneficent. Vice obscures her failures from her line of sight.

Kant believed that our motivational structure is largely opaque to us. When morality aligns with self-interest or inclination, as it does for the *Groundwork's* shopkeeper and sympathetic philanthropist respectively, we cannot be sure whether or not our motives (much less the motives of other people) reflect an underlying commitment to morality. Kant's suggestion is that we can know this only when morality and self-interest or inclination come apart, as they do in the case of the sorrowing philanthropist. Only then can we see the depth of the philanthropist's commitment to the good of others.

Crucially, vice adds even more opacity to our motivational structure, since it enables us to convince ourselves that morality doesn't actually require us to do what we do not want to do. A shopkeeper beset by vice might come to believe that he is morally justified in charging unfair prices. A would-be philanthropist might come to believe that people would be better off without his help. This is how John Dashwood, who starts out with reasonably good intentions, ends up behaving in an appallingly selfish and callous way without even recognizing what he is doing.

Kant was deeply concerned about human frailty. He regarded vice as a constant threat, even for those who seem to be committed to morality. In order to see why this is so, let us take a look at another example from the *Groundwork,* the cold-hearted benefactor. Kant employs the cold-hearted benefactor as an illustration of someone who is committed to morality in general and to the duty of beneficence more specifically, but who lacks sympathetic feelings.

The cold-hearted benefactor as Kant describes him does seem to be committed to beneficence. He has not subordinated morality to inclination in his reasoning about action. Quite the contrary, he seems to help people against his inclinations. And yet, despite his currently unwavering commitment to morality, the cold-hearted benefactor is still in some danger of falling prey to vice. Consider Kant's description of him:

> Furthermore, if nature had put little sympathy into this or that person's heart; if he, though an honest man, were cold in temperament and indifferent to the sufferings of others—perhaps because he has the special gifts of patience and fortitude in his own sufferings and he assumes or even demands the same of others; if such a man (who would in truth not be the worst product of nature) were not exactly fashioned by nature to be a humanitarian, would he not still find in himself a source from which he might give himself a worth far higher than that of a good-natured temperament? Assuredly he would.[21]

Strictly speaking, nature has not really fashioned any of us to be humanitarians. We all have to do battle with our inclinations toward self-love and self-conceit. And so we should look more closely at the cold-hearted benefactor to see just how well armed he is for fighting this battle. He himself has the "gifts" of patience and fortitude. Let us suppose, as seems plausible, that these are not mere gifts that have been bestowed on him, but genuinely admirable qualities that he has worked hard to cultivate and develop. He looks around him and sees that others have not succeeded so well in cultivating these characteristics. Let us further suppose that he is right about this, that he is surrounded by people who are weaker and perhaps morally lazier than he is. He helps them anyway, but he is, as Kant says, indifferent to their sufferings.

Perhaps he is indifferent because having achieved his elevated state, he cannot really feel empathy for them. The pain they feel is not pain that he would feel; his knowledge of it is secondhand. But he correctly judges that they experience it and, in an effort to promote their ends, he takes steps to alleviate it. Now the mere fact that a person does not feel the pain of another does not preclude them from having the right moral attitude toward that person. But if the cold-hearted benefactor really is committed to morality, he should see his natural inability to sympathize with others as a hindrance to his moral efforts, something he must work to

[21] *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals,* 398.

overcome.[22] Otherwise, he is in danger of becoming a misanthrope, despising others for their weaknesses and frailties even as he helps them.

There is a second moral danger for the cold-hearted benefactor, which is the danger of feeling morally superior to the ones he is helping. We can imagine him feeling smug about his own fortitude and independence in a way that reflects some self-conceit. Smug people standardly believe themselves to be in the right. Indeed, they often really are in the right, as we are supposing the cold-hearted benefactor to be. His stoicism in the face of suffering, particularly if he has earned it through his efforts, is genuinely admirable. And yet, if it is accompanied by reflections on the superiority of his own state, he is in danger of becoming the kind of person whose motivation in helping is self-satisfaction, not beneficence. Such a person enjoys helping because he enjoys being the kind of person who does not need the help that he is providing, and helping the less fortunate is a pleasing reminder of his own virtue.

This, it should be apparent, is not the motivational structure of a person with a good will. This imaginary version of the cold-hearted benefactor is no better than the shopkeeper who charges fair prices only so he doesn't lose business. Indeed, he may be morally worse. The shopkeeper is merely self-interested, but the self-satisfied cold-hearted benefactor is sinking into the realm of vice. The sympathetic philanthropist, whatever his failings, is not in danger of misanthropy or moral arrogance. But the cold-hearted benefactor who is not on guard against vice, particularly the stealthy form of vice that clothes itself in moral dress, is in peril.

As I have described indifference, it has elements of narcissism and self-absorption. It narrows our frame of reference and distorts the reasoning that takes place within that frame of

[22] Critics of Kant sometimes miss this point, incorrectly assuming that Kant sees the cold-hearted benefactor as a moral paragon of sorts. Kant, however, merely describes him as not the worst product of nature (GW 398).

reference. Our own concerns loom large and we convince ourselves that we are justified in prioritizing those concerns over the needs of others, given what else we are doing. Of course, this is sometimes a perfectly legitimate way to reason about my own needs in relationship to the needs of others. Sometimes it is true that I should prioritize my own ends over the needs of others. But often it is false and I nevertheless think it is true. It is vice that interferes with my ability to see what my duties really are.

In Austen's novel, it is clear that had it not been for Fanny's interference, John's moral principles might have prevailed. This illuminates another important feature of Kant's account of vice, which is that has social dimensions to it. This can be easy to miss, especially since Kant's ethical thought is traditionally framed in individualistic terms. The categorical imperative is a principle of individual rational wills. And yet Kant's moral anthropology makes clear just how much he thinks we are influenced by our surroundings, for the better and especially for the worse. In order to appreciate how Kant thinks vice spreads its tentacles throughout a community, let's turn to what he says about the social dimension of vice.[23]

Consider, for instance, the duties of respect that we owe to others. It is standard to think of these simply as duties to others not to treat them with contempt, defame them, mock them, or ridicule them. Kant, however, labels mockery, defamation, and ridicule as vices. Moreover, his discussion of them focuses primarily on what such behaviors do to us as individuals and to the communities in which we live and interact.

The social dimensions of vice are especially apparent in Kant's discussion of defamation, which is the habit of spreading disparaging gossip for the pleasure of it. Kant worries that

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[23] For more on Kant on social life, see Allan Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought;* Sharon Anderson-Gold, *Unnecessary Evil: History and Moral Progress in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant;* Kate Moran, *Community and Progress in Kant's Moral*; Philip Rossi, S.J., *The Social Authority of Reason* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005).

widespread practice of defamation "diminishes respect for humanity as such, so as finally to cast a shadow of worthlessness over our race itself, making misanthropy the prevalent cast of mind."[24] The more we engage in defamation, the more likely we are to take a dark view of humanity. When defamation becomes a widespread practice, that dark view surrounds us. We might put it this way: misanthropy is contagious, and defamation is one of the disease vectors. This is how Kantian vice becomes a social malady, not just an individual one. It generates social practices that reinforce and entrench bad habits and distorted patterns of reasoning.

Indifference to the sufferings of others is also a social malady. When widely instantiated, indifference enables the normalization and rationalization of behaviors and practices that permit us to ignore the actual moral demands on our energy and material resources. Like misanthropy, vice-induced indifference to the sufferings of others is contagious. This means that in a community in which indifference is the prevailing norm, it is harder to avoid falling into its grip. We will have even more trouble recognizing the widespread moral failures in which we are engaging when others are engaging in the very same failures.

Defamation and ridicule are pleasant because they allow us to feel superior to the targets of our gossip and mockery and so feed our self-conceit. When defamation and ridicule become social activities, the pernicious effects on our self-conceit are intensified and reinforced. The smug superiority I feel as a result of spreading or hearing nasty gossip about someone else is echoed back to me by the others with whom I share the pleasure, normalizing it and making it seem justified.

The self-conceit that fuels indifference is usually far subtler than this (although we should not underestimate how subtle misanthropy can be). It operates by enabling us to feel a sense of

[24] DV 466

satisfaction in how well we are performing our moral duties by attending so carefully to the labels on our coffee and remembering to bring our reusable bags to the store with us. This can take an overt form, as with moral grandstanding.[25] But it need not. It can simply manifest itself as a kind of satisfaction with my own moral righteousness, combined perhaps with a feeling of moral superiority to people who buy ordinary coffee and take it home in a plastic bag. It can even take the form of social shaming, a practice that can easily become widespread. Social shaming is not always a bad thing, particularly if it goads people in the right direction. But as a practice, it carries moral risks, specifically the risk of moral self-satisfaction. Shaming other people can exacerbate our existing tendencies toward self-conceit. More generally, the more we feel satisfied with what we are already doing, and the more that satisfaction is reinforced by social norms, the less reason we will see to change our ways. If we all feel pleasantly beneficent because we buy the right coffee, then we are unlikely to see where we are in fact falling short. The contagious dimensions of vice make it even more difficult to engage in the kind of self-reflection we need in order to identify and remedy it. Moral complacency thus becomes entrenched and the true demands of beneficence remain obscured.

I will conclude with a few brief remarks about how incorporating Kant's account of vice more thoroughly into his moral framework might give us clarity about its normative demands. Kant's primary solution to remedying our moral failures is the court of conscience, where we bring ourselves to face our inner judge. But as we've seen, the person afflicted by Kantian vice will have some trouble recognizing himself in the mirror. How, then, could the court of

[25] For an account of moral grandstanding, see Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke, *Grandstanding: The Use and Abuse of Moral Talk*.

conscience be of any practical use? Couldn't a vicious person engage in self-reflection and decide that she is just fine the way she is?[26]

As we have seen, Kant thinks this kind of self-deception is a serious moral threat. But the extent of the threat depends in part on the social context in which the self-reflection takes place. Fust as social practices can reinforce and condone vice, so they can also reinforce and condone virtue.[27] It is possible to set up our social world in ways that nudge us in the direction of better behavior and do not permit easy mutual congratulations for minimal efforts. Virtue signaling, while often motivated by self-conceit, can nevertheless have social benefits insofar as it instantiates and reinforces social norms that encourage good behavior. I may be virtue signaling when I wear thrifted clothes instead of new ones, but it is still a good thing to do, particularly if I can make it popular.

It's true that we like to be seen as good people, and we like to see ourselves that way. This is why buying the "right" coffee can feel so satisfying. It would be unrealistic for us to suppose that we can get rid of this motivation entirely. It might also be unwise, insofar as that feeling of satisfaction is an inducement to perform what are undeniably good actions. Whatever the motivations of the shopkeeper and the philanthropist, we still want them to keep charging fair prices and helping people. But that doesn't mean that we can't construct social environments that make beneficence less about us and more about the people in need of assistance.

Within Kantianism, there is a practical question about whether and how we can disentangle beneficent motives from morally suspect motivations, motivations that obscure and encourage our existing tendencies to promote our own interests and social standing. To some

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[26] See Martin Sticker, "When the Reflective Watch-Dog Barks: Conscience and Self-Deception in Kant."
[27] On this, see Judith Lichtenberg, *Distant Strangers: Ethics, Psychology, and Global Poverty.*

extent, it may not matter, at least not if our goal is simply to encourage beneficent actions. If we are doing good in the world, does it matter why?

I think for Kantians the answer to that question must be that it does matter, at least if the ultimate moral aim is the cultivation of a good will. The person with a good will must commit herself to beneficence as an end. She is morally obligated to take up the ends of others as her own. A person who gives away money out to indulge his own inclinations or to improve his social standing is arguably not acting from beneficence as Kant understands it. Beneficence expresses a commitment to respecting others as setters of ends. The act of giving away money does not always express that commitment.

Kant's discussion of beneficence in the *Doctrine of Virtue* shows his awareness of this problem. There he claims that beneficence should be done in secret when possible, since that makes it difficult for the benefactor to feel smug in his generosity. Anonymity also blocks what Kant regards as a highly undesirable side effect of beneficence, which is that it creates a permanently unequal status relationship between the benefactor and the beneficiary:

> A *rich* man…should hardly even regard beneficence as a meritorious duty on his part, even though he also puts others under obligation by it. The satisfaction he derives from his beneficence, which costs him no sacrifice, is a way of reveling in moral feelings. He must also carefully avoid any appearance of intending to bind the other by it; for if he showed that he wanted to put the other under an obligation (which always humbles the other in his own eyes), it would not be a true benefit that he rendered him. Instead, he must show that he is himself put under obligation by the other's acceptance or honored by it, hence that the duty is merely something that he owes, unless (as is better) he can practice his beneficence in complete secrecy.[28]

In this passage we see Kant recommending a variety of social practices that both remedy the inevitable inequality produced by beneficent actions and also reduce the space for vice to enter. Kant regards ingratitude as a vice, so it is important that beneficiaries not feel ungrateful. But it

[28] DV 453.

is just as important that benefactors not revel in moral feelings, since that feeds their self-conceit and deceives them into thinking that their beneficence reflects greater generosity than it does.

Kant goes on to express skepticism that much of what passes for beneficence by the wealthy should even count as beneficence at all. Likely it falls under the domain of justice. But self-conceit and self-interest can distort the reasoning of a wealthy person, enabling her to think of her transfer of wealth as expressions of generosity rather than fulfillment of duties of justice. It can also lead her to think that helping actions are beneficent when in fact they are self-serving, or that her helping actions are sufficient when they in fact fall woefully short. This last delusion is the one afflicting John Dashwood, who falsely believes himself to be acting in accordance with the demands of beneficence toward his sisters.

From the standpoint of Kantianism, a wealthy person who is committed to cultivating her good will must do beneficent actions that help other people without fostering vice in herself. How do we do this? Not just by force of will, which even Kant recognizes is inadequate to the task. In various places, he suggests methods of self-improvement that might readily be described as hacking our own psychologies as individuals and as members of social groups. Notably, he suggests that we can bring ourselves to care about the ends of others in the right way through doing actions that promote those ends.[29] That would suggest that helping people for reasons of self-interest or immediate inclination will, over time, turn us into people who help them for reasons of beneficence. Whether or not this is true as a matter of human psychology, it can solve the problem only if we can successfully avoid the overhanging threat of vice.

In the *Religion,* Kant recommends surrounding ourselves with people who, like us, are trying to cultivate a good will.[30] Just as there is moral danger in communities inhabited by the

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[29] See, for instance, *Lectures on Ethics* 27:419.
[30] *Religion* 6:94-98

vicious, so there is moral strength in communities committed to the right ends. Because of this, Kantians ought to take seriously ways in which social norms can be harnessed for positive effect, not only on the extent of our beneficence but on our ability to practice it without devolving into vice. Normalizing significant sacrifices is a reasonably well-established way of getting us to make them. It is hard for me to revel in my own magnificence when my neighbors are doing exactly the same thing that I'm doing. Of course, we cannot normalize practices without making them public, which means that at least some acts of beneficence cannot be done in secret without undermining their positive social effects. But we can still detach the self-interested and self-promoting rewards from beneficent actions in ways that make it less likely that those actions will enable us to revel in moral feeling and convince ourselves falsely that we've done our part when we've done very little at all. Insofar as behavior that is actually indifferent seems normal to us, the more difficult it is to uproot it. But if we can normalize behavior that reflects our actual commitments, then we will be in a better position to rid ourselves of indifference and the vices that give rise to it.

In this paper I have argued that Kantian discussions of beneficence as a response to global poverty are enriched by incorporating his account of vice. This is because our failures to live up to the demands of beneficence can be explained in terms of the vices to which Kant thinks we are prone. If we focus entirely on the moral status of particular helping actions, we will miss the significance of vice in shaping our understanding of what beneficence requires of us. The Kantian moral requirement to commit ourselves to the ends of others is threatened by vice and its ability to distort our reasoning. Vice is a stealthy opponent, particularly when it is widespread in a community. Behavior that is in fact indifferent toward the sufferings of others is easily justified in communities in which it has become the norm.

The Kantian moral war against global poverty has many fronts. In this paper I have argued that the battle against vice is one such front, one that has not always received the attention it deserves. Within the Kantian framework, the challenge is not simply to determine what beneficence demands of us. The challenge is also to shape ourselves and our social world so that, despite our natural frailties and propensities, we become the kind of people who willingly do what beneficence demands of us.[31]

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[31] [Acknowledgments redacted for review]

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