

## Kant and the Duty to Act from Duty

Michael Walschots

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*Abstract:* Several interpreters argue that Kant believes we have a duty to act ‘from duty’. If there is such a duty, however, then Kant’s moral theory faces a serious problem, namely that of an allegedly vicious infinite regress of duties. No serious attempt has been made to determine how Kant might respond to this problem and insufficient work has been done to determine whether he even believes we have a duty to act from duty. In this paper I argue that not only does Kant *not* hold that there is a duty to act from duty, he explicitly rejects the idea.

*Keywords:* duty, infinite regress, moral worth, obligation, ought implies can

### **Introduction**

A central tenet of Kant’s moral philosophy holds that in order for action to possess moral worth it must not only be in conformity with duty, it must also be performed *from duty*. What exactly it means to act from duty is controversial and has generated a significant amount of discussion, as have the related concepts of the good will and moral worth.<sup>i</sup> A topic that has generated significantly less discussion, even though it is no less central to properly understanding Kant’s ethics, is whether acting from duty is itself morally obligatory, that is, whether Kant believes we have a *duty* to act from duty. Several notable scholars, including Henry Allison, H.J. Paton, Robert Pippin, and W.D. Ross, have argued that there is such a duty, for Kant. If there is such a duty, however, then Kant’s moral theory faces a serious problem, namely that of an allegedly vicious infinite regress: on one interpretation of this regress, a duty to act from duty would require that this duty itself (the duty to act from duty) be performed from duty, and so on *ad infinitum*. As I will explain later in this paper, such a regress would be a problem because it would both be impossible to satisfy and would threaten the plausibility of Kant’s account of moral worth. The limited amount of secondary literature on this problem has a number of deficiencies, the first of which is that the regress is

conceived in two distinct ways, and it is unclear if only one, both, or neither of them are a real threat. More importantly, however, aside from the fact that no serious attempt has been made to determine how Kant might respond to this problem, insufficient work has been done to determine whether Kant even holds the view that is said to give rise to it, namely the view that we have a duty to act from duty. My aim in this paper is to resolve these deficiencies by arguing that not only does Kant *not* hold that there is a duty to act from duty, he explicitly rejects the idea.

My discussion consists of three main sections. In section 1, I clarify the two versions of the regress that are said to arise from a duty to act from duty. First is the ‘infinite regress argument’ presented by Ross in *The Right and the Good*, according to which a duty to act from duty generates a self-contradiction. Second, there is the kind of regress that is similar to that which threatens certain accounts of epistemological justification. In section 2, I turn to Kant and examine the two positions that scholars believe commit him to the view that there is a duty to act from duty: the general obligation of virtue and the duty to moral perfection. I argue that neither of these views commit Kant to the existence of such a duty, but to something else entirely and which generates neither kind of regress: the general obligation of virtue is not a duty proper but an *obligation* and thus does not require an action but only signifies the type of necessitation involved, and the duty to moral perfection is the wide duty to *strive* to acquire the moral disposition rather than the narrow duty to in fact have that disposition. In Section 3 I illustrate that Kant explicitly rejects the idea of a duty to act from duty. I argue that Kant’s rejection of this duty is significant, for it reveals that the primary problem with such a duty is not any kind of regress, it is rather the implausible psychological view it presupposes, namely that of being able to choose one’s motives at will. In the end, I hope to have both resolved a potentially serious problem thought to threaten Kant’s moral philosophy as well as clarified some important features of his doctrine of duties along the way.

## 1. The Two Versions of the Infinite Regress

### 1.1 Ross and the ‘Infinite Regress Argument’

The first version of the regress thought to arise from a duty to act from duty is discussed in detail in W.D. Ross’s *The Right and the Good*. In the first chapter, entitled ‘The Meaning of Right’, Ross seeks to define the term ‘right’ and accomplishes this, in the first instance, by arguing that the concept of right is distinct from that of the morally good. Ross’s argument takes the form of a

*reductio ad absurdum*: he wants to show the absurdities that result from assuming that these concepts are identical. Important for his argument is that he makes certain basic assumptions about both the nature of the term ‘right’ and that of the ‘morally good’: Ross claims that ‘right’ is equivalent in meaning to “something that ought to be done” (2002, 4) in the sense of what is “morally obligatory” (2002, 4), and with respect to ‘morally good’, Ross claims that “it is, I think, quite clear that the only acts that are morally good are those that proceed from a good motive” (2002, 4). Ross then argues against the idea that right, in the sense of the morally obligatory, is equivalent in meaning to the morally good, in the sense of action proceeding from a good motive. Put differently, Ross wants to show why it would be absurd to think that we could ever be morally obligated to act from a good motive.

In *The Right and the Good* Ross addresses two main problems with such a view.<sup>ii</sup> The first, according to which a moral obligation to act from a good motive would violate the ‘ought implies can’ principle, will be discussed in Section 3. My present focus is Ross’s second argument which, in *The Foundations of Ethics*, he dubs “the infinite regress argument.” (1939, 119) This argument is particularly important because it describes a problem that arises not from the more general view that we are morally obligated to act from a good motive, whatever that motive may be, rather it is a problem that arises from the more specific view that we are morally obligated to act from the sense of duty in particular, which Ross considers to be the best motive. (see 2002, 164-5 and 1939, 117) Ross argues that a moral obligation to act from the sense of duty or, to put the view in Kantian terms, a duty to act from duty, is particularly problematic because it gives rise to an infinite regress.

The kind of regress Ross believes results from a moral obligation to act from the sense of duty is not what one might initially expect: according to Ross, such an obligation generates a self-contradiction which would require an infinite series of conceptual amendments to resolve. Here is Ross’s full description of the issue:

if the sense of duty is to be my motive for doing a certain act, it must be the sense that it is my duty to do that act. If, therefore, we say ‘it is my duty to do act  $A$  from the sense of duty’, this means ‘it is my duty to do act  $A$  from the sense that it is my duty to do act  $A$ ’. And here the whole expression is in contradiction with part of itself. The whole sentence says ‘it is my duty to-do-act- $A$ -from-the-sense-that-it-is-my-duty-to-do-act- $A$ ’. But the latter part of the sentence implies that what I think is that it is my duty to-do-act- $A$  simply. And if, as the theory in question requires, we try to amend the latter part of the expression to bring it into accord with the whole expression, we get the result ‘it is my duty to do act  $A$  from the sense that it is my duty to do act  $A$  from the sense that it is my duty to do act  $A$ ’, where again the last part of the expression is in conflict with the theory, and with the

sentence as a whole. It is clear that a further similar amendment, and a further, and in the end an infinite series of amendments would be necessary in the attempt to bring the last part of the expression into accordance with the theory, and that even then we should not have succeeded in doing so. (2002, 5)

The problem that Ross identifies with a duty to act from duty, then, is that it is impossible to accurately and consistently describe this duty without contradiction: given the nature of the duty, we are perpetually forced to describe it as simultaneously commanding 1) that we *both* perform a certain action (*A*) *and* that we perform it from the sense of duty, and 2) that we merely perform a certain action (*A*). Such a duty gives rise to an infinite regress in the sense that an infinite number of amendments to the description of the duty would be required to make it both self-consistent and consistent with the more general moral theory, which holds that our duty is not merely to perform an action but also to perform the action from a particular motive, namely the sense of duty.

## 1.2 The Infinite Regress of Duties

In *The Right and the Good*, Ross claims that “Kant is the great exemplar” of a figure who believes that “our duty is to act from a certain motive”. (2002, 5) Ross does not mention any particular position which might commit Kant to such a view, nor does he cite any passages from Kant’s major works; Ross simply assumes it is obvious that Kant holds such a view. Ross is not the only one who has claimed that Kant is committed to there being a duty to act from duty, nor is he the only one to have noticed that a duty to act from duty gives rise to a potentially problematic regress. Several prominent Kant scholars have more recently claimed that Kant believes we have a duty to act from duty, and that for this reason his moral philosophy is vulnerable to a potentially vicious regress. These scholars conceive of the nature of the regress in an entirely different way, however.

In his seminal book *Kant’s Theory of Freedom*, Henry Allison discusses Kant’s duty to holiness or moral perfection and conceives of it as a duty to act from duty. Allison then describes the problem, to which such a duty gives rise, in the following way: “if in connection with every duty we also have a further duty to do it from duty, then that principle must apply to that further duty *ad infinitum*”. (Allison 1990, 178) Similarly, when discussing Kant’s distinction between ethical and legal duties in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Robert Pippin claims that Kant “suggests here a puzzling claim about moral duties: they always come in a dual form, commanding us both to obey the law and to

make respect for the law itself our ground for action (a proposal that suggests an odd regress).” (Pippin 2006, 420) I will discuss in the next section the specific positions and passages these scholars identify as supposedly committing Kant to the view that we have a duty to act from duty, and which thereby make him vulnerable to a regress. For the time being, it is important to note that this version of the regress is distinct from that described by Ross: according to this second version, since the duty to act from duty applies to itself, that is, since it requires that the duty to act from duty be performed from duty, it seems to apply to itself *ad infinitum* and thereby generate an allegedly vicious infinite regress of duties.

It should be mentioned that Allison, Pippin, and others<sup>iii</sup> are not clear about wherein the viciousness of this infinite regress lies. One option is to say that infinite regresses are inherently vicious and any theory giving rise to one should be rejected. Another, more plausible option is to say that an infinite regress is not inherently vicious, but reveals a feature of the theory that is problematic.<sup>iv</sup> On this latter reading, the second version of the regress described above might be conceived as similar in kind to the regress that threatens linear accounts of epistemological justification that reject foundationalism: just as an infinite series of inferences would never supply ultimate epistemological justification, so could we never ultimately fulfill an infinite series of duties. The ultimate problem with a duty to act from duty on this reading is therefore that it would require the impossible.

No matter which version of the regress we consider, if either applies to Kant then he is faced with a “devastating” problem, as Lewis White Beck has claimed (1955, 98n), and one that Allison believes is “inexorably intertwined with some of the most controversial topics in Kant’s moral theory”. (1990, 178) Indeed, either version of the regress is a serious problem because not only would an infinite series of duties be impossible to fulfill, but, as Marcus Willaschek (1997, pg. 211-217) and H.J. Paton (1946, pg. 117-119) have noted, it threatens the very existence of ethical duties in the first place: if Kant cannot plausibly describe the requirement to act *from duty* without the threat of a regress, then we are absolved of any such requirement and all that is left for us to do is act merely *in conformity* with duty. To put the problem another way: if acting from duty is what is essential to moral worth (4:398), but Kant cannot account for the sense in which acting from duty is required, then he might not have a plausible account of action with moral worth at all. Given the seriousness of these issues, it is surprising that no thorough attempt has been made to determine whether Kant even believes there is a duty to act from duty. In the remainder of this paper I will argue that not only does Kant *not* believe there to be a duty to act from duty, rather, as I illustrate in

section 3, he explicitly rejects the idea. Before turning to that topic, however, in the next section I identify and clarify the positions that others have, mistakenly I will argue, taken to commit Kant to a duty to act from duty.

## 2. The General Obligation of Virtue and the Duty to Moral Perfection

Scholars have identified two positions which, at least at first glance, seem to commit Kant to the view that we have a duty to act from duty. Both positions are articulated in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. The first, which Kant calls the ‘obligation of virtue’, is more complicated because it is not well-understood in the literature<sup>v</sup> and will therefore be treated in some detail in the following. The second, the duty to moral perfection, is both more straightforward and has received considerably more discussion in the literature, so clarifying it will take less time. In both cases, however, I argue that on closer inspection neither position amounts to the claim that we have a duty to act from duty and that, for this reason, Kant is vulnerable to neither version of the regress.

### 2.1 The General Obligation of Virtue

Kant initially mentions the first position that seems to amount to the claim that we have a duty to act from duty in the Introduction to the Doctrine of Virtue, section II, where he makes an analogy that illustrates an important feature belonging to duties of virtue. There, Kant claims that “To every duty there corresponds *a* right in the sense of an *authorization* to do something ... but it is not the case that to every duty there correspond *rights* of another to coerce something”; the latter duties “are called, specifically, *duties of right*”. (6:383<sup>vi</sup>) The idea is that duties of right properly speaking are only a subset of all duties more generally. “In the same way [*Eben so*]”, Kant claims, “to every ethical *obligation* [*aller ethischen Verbindlichkeit*] there corresponds the concept of virtue, but not all ethical duties are thereby duties of virtue. ... Only *an end that is also a duty* can be called a **duty of virtue**”. (6:383) As with the relation between duties of right and all duties, the idea here is that duties of virtue are only a subset of ethical obligations more generally. Accordingly, and perhaps unexpectedly, Kant argues that in addition to duties of virtue there are “those [duties? obligations?] that have to do not so much with a certain end (matter, object of choice) as merely with *what is formal* in the moral determination of the will (e.g., that an action in conformity with duty must also be done *from duty*)” (6:383). Since they do not concern an end, these latter things “are not duties of virtue”.

(6:383) Furthermore, because there is more than one end that is also a duty, Kant says “there are several duties of virtue” but with respect to the other kind of ethical obligation, Kant claims “only one (virtuous disposition) is thought, which however holds for all actions”. (6:383)

In this passage Kant appears to be claiming that, in addition to duties of virtue, there is a separate and singular thing, also falling under the category of ethical obligations in general, which concerns what is formal in the determination of the will and thus commands “that an action in conformity with duty must also be done *from duty*”. (6:383) Several scholars, including Allison (see 1990, 178f.), Paton (1946, 116), Pippin (2006, 442 fn. 9), and Willaschek (1997, 211), have understood Kant to mean here that there is a separate duty to act from duty. There is good reason for this interpretation, for Kant’s language in the passages quoted above certainly suggests that this is a duty proper, even if he never explicitly calls this obligation a duty. At the same time, Kant is not particularly clear given he refers to the ethical obligation(s) that are not duties of virtue in the plural (6:383.10), but then goes on to say that there is only one of them (6:383.16).

Fortunately, Kant mentions this additional ethical obligation in two other places in the Introduction to the Doctrine of Virtue. First, in section VII, while explaining that duties of virtue are meritorious and duties of right are owed (6:390), Kant claims that “The same holds true of the general ethical command [dem allgemeinen ethischen Gebote], ‘act in conformity with duty *from duty*.’” (6:391) Unfortunately, this passage offers no details on the nature of this general ethical command; Kant’s point is merely to say that doing one’s duty *from duty* is meritorious, rather than owed, as is the case for all duties of virtue. The second place where Kant mentions this ethical obligation is sometime later in section XVIII of the Introduction, where he repeats the idea that duties of virtue are not coextensive with the more general category of ethical obligations:

not every *obligation of virtue* [*Tugendverpflichtung*] (obligatio ethica) is a duty of virtue [*eine Tugendpflicht*] (officium ethicum s. virtutis); in other words, respect for law as such does not yet establish an end as a duty, and only such an end is a duty of virtue. — Hence there is only *one* obligation of virtue [*Tugendverpflichtung*], whereas there are *many* duties of virtue [*Tugendpflichten*]; for there are indeed many objects that it is also our duty to have as ends, but there is only one virtuous disposition, the subjective determining ground to fulfill one’s duty. (6:410)

Here we have Kant giving this ethical obligation a name: the obligation of virtue [*Tugendverpflichtung*], but this is the only place in all of Kant’s writings where he uses this term.

At first glance, these passages are unhelpful and we are still left wondering whether this obligation amounts to a duty to act from duty in a way that makes Kant vulnerable to either, or

both, of the two regresses described above. At the same time, these passages are revealing because they clarify something important that was initially left ambiguous: although Kant's language in the first passage cited above (6:383) suggests that this "obligation of virtue" is a duty proper, in the other two passages Kant clearly calls it an "obligation [Verbindlichkeit, Verpflichtung]" (6:410) or just a "command [Gebote]" (6:391). This is significant because even though his language occasionally suggests that duty and obligation are equivalent<sup>vii</sup>, Kant consistently goes on to explain that duty is "*the necessity of an action*" (4:400.18–19) and obligation is *necessitation*, that is, the way in which we are bound more generally. (see 4:439.30–32 and 6:223) In the Introduction to the *Metaphysics of Morals*, for example, Kant describes duty as "the matter of obligation, and there can be one and the same duty (as to the action) although we can be bound to it in different ways." (6:222) Similarly, in the Vigilantius lecture notes on ethics Kant acknowledges that "The concept of duty is closely connected with that of *obligation*" (27:492), but he goes on to clarify that they are not the same, for "To have an obligation anywhere, or be bound to something, is not yet duty." (27:493) These passages suggest that whereas duty is the *matter* of obligation, that is, what we are obligated to do, obligation itself is the *form* or way in which we are bound. Claudia Blöser offers a helpful way to understand the distinction as between *what* is required, that is, duty or the matter or action, and "the *requiredness* of the action, i.e., the way in which we are bound to obey a duty", namely obligation. (Blöser 2021, 314)<sup>viii</sup>

If obligation refers to the *way* in which one is bound to obey a duty, the implication is that there are different ways in which one can be bound. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant draws a distinction between two types of 'constraint' to distinguish between the kind of obligation belonging to right, on the one hand, and to virtue on the other: constraint, he says, "may be an *external constraint* or a *self-constraint*." (6:379) External constraint is where one is obligated by an external authority via rewards and punishments, for example, to perform an action. Duties of virtue command that we adopt certain ends (6:382ff.), however, so they cannot be subject to external constraint because, as Kant says, "I can never be constrained by others *to have an end*: only I myself can *make* something my end". (6:381) Duties of virtue are therefore subject to self-constraint only. However, the self-constraint involved in setting oneself an end is only ethical if we freely and autonomously adopt an end based on the suggestion of reason, rather than inclination. Accordingly, duties of virtue involve not just any kind of self-constraint, but "free self-constraint". (6:383) These two kinds of constraint, external and (free) self-constraint are two ways to describe *necessitation*, that is, two ways of being required or obligated, namely by an external force or autonomously.



The most important part of Kant's distinction between external and self-constraint for my purposes is that self-constraint is not only the *appropriate* sort to have in matters of virtue, rather it is the *only* kind of constraint available to duties of virtue: adopting an end can *only* take place by means of free self-constraint. The most an external authority, or even my own inclinations, can do is constrain me to perform an *external* action; but adopting an end is something I can do only if I freely and autonomously choose to do so myself; external constraint is just not possible here. The general obligation of virtue is expressing precisely this: it is an obligation in the sense that it is what one ought and indeed *must* do if duties of virtue are to be ethical, and not merely legal, in the first place. We thus might understand it as a *condition* that must be satisfied in order to fulfill a duty of virtue: duties of virtue must be freely and autonomously adopted, that is, we must freely constrain ourselves to adopt them. This is the *way* in which duties of virtue must be satisfied. Duties of right do not have this requirement: "that lawgiving which does not include the incentive of duty in the law and so admits an incentive other than the idea of duty itself is *juridical*." (6:219) Ethical lawgiving, on the other hand, does have this requirement: "That lawgiving which makes an action a duty and also makes this duty the incentive is *ethical*." (6:219) Thus, the obligation of virtue should not be understood as a duty proper, for it is not commanding us to perform an action. The obligation of virtue merely expresses the fact that duties of virtue are a distinct kind of obligation. As Kant himself says: "what it [ethics] does not have in common with right is only the *kind of obligation*." (6:220, emphasis added) This general obligation of virtue therefore signifies that duties of virtue have an additional requirement that duties of right do not: that they be freely and autonomously adopted, that is, that they be performed *from duty* if they are to be ethical at all. Otherwise, we merely perform the action required of us and act only rightfully or in conformity with duty but not *from duty*.<sup>ix</sup>

In light of the above, we are in a position to see why neither regress arises in the case of the general obligation of virtue. The obligation we have to make duty our incentive when performing duties of virtue merely expresses a condition that must be satisfied in order for duties to be ethical at all, rather than juridical. The obligation thus expresses that duties of virtue must be fulfilled in a specific way, namely via free self-constraint. As such, it is best understood as a requirement or necessary condition of ethical, as opposed to rightful, action. Neither form of the regress arises here: first, there is nothing contradictory about being simultaneously 'obligated' to act from duty and it being our duty to perform a specific action; it is perfectly consistent for there to be a duty to perform certain actions and to say that we have to perform such duties in a certain way if we are to

fulfill an ethical rather than a merely legal duty. Second, nor does this obligation apply to itself and thereby generate a regress; although it is a second-order condition that all first-order duties must satisfy, an obligation is not a duty, for Kant, so an obligation to perform duties from duty applies only to duties, not to this more general obligation itself. With respect to this first position, then, what seemed to amount to the claim that we have a duty to act from duty at first glance amounts to something quite different on closer inspection, and which avoids both forms of the regress altogether.<sup>x</sup>

## 2.2. The Duty to Moral Perfection

The second position, which even more straightforwardly seems to commit Kant to the view that we have a duty to act from duty, is one of the two duties of virtue themselves, namely the duty to adopt one's own perfection as one's end (the other being the happiness of others). The perfection Kant is talking about here is the perfection that can result from a human being's actions or deeds, rather than the perfections that may result from gifts of nature. The duty to make one's own perfection one's end consists in two things: first, "*cultivating one's faculties*" and, second, "the cultivation of one's *will*". (6:387) According to the first requirement, "A human being has a duty to raise himself from the crude state of his nature, from his animality (*quoad actum*), more and more toward humanity, by which he alone is capable of setting himself ends". (6:387) According to the second requirement, "A human being has a duty to carry the cultivation of his *will* up to the purest virtuous disposition, in which the *law* becomes also the incentive to his actions that conform with duty and he obeys the law from duty. This disposition is inner morally practical perfection". (6:387) It is this second requirement of the duty to adopt one's own perfection as one's end, that is, the cultivation of one's will, that some have taken to commit Kant to a duty to act from duty. After all, Kant does claim that "The greatest perfection of a human being is to do his duty *from duty* (for the law to be not only the rule but also the incentive of his actions)" (6:392). Since Kant is very clear that the duty to moral perfection is a duty properly speaking, it might seem difficult to deny that this view amounts to a duty to act from duty. It is therefore unsurprising that scholars such as Allison (1990, 178f.) and Paton (1946, 116) have taken Kant to mean precisely this, and that he is threatened by regress for this reason.

In contrast to the general obligation of virtue, it is much easier to see how this position does not amount to the claim that we have a duty to act from duty. An important aspect of the duty to

cultivate our own will is that it is a wide rather than a narrow duty. Kant says that “The wider the duty ... the more imperfect is a man’s obligation to action” (6:390) and in this respect the duty to cultivate our morality “At first sight ... looks like a *narrow* obligation, and the principle of duty seems to prescribe with the precision and strictness of a law not only the *legality* but also the *morality* of every action, *that is, the disposition*”. (6:392, emphasis added) This duty looks like a narrow obligation because it seems clear what we must do to fulfill it, namely change our disposition and act from duty. Soon after claiming that it *appears* narrow, however, Kant repeats that “this duty ... is of only *wide* obligation”. (6:393) This means that rather than instruct with ‘precision’ what exactly we are to do, the duty to moral perfection instructs only “to *strive* with all one’s might that the thought of duty for its own sake is the sufficient incentive of every action conforming to duty”. (6:393, my emphasis)

It is in virtue of the fact that the duty to moral perfection is wide rather than narrow that no regress is generated here either.<sup>xi</sup> In that the duty to cultivate one’s will is not a duty to (narrowly) perform duty from duty, but rather only to (widely) *strive* to make duty the incentive in every action conforming to duty, there is, first, nothing obviously contradictory about having both duties to specific actions and a duty to strive to have a pure disposition; these are two perfectly compatible kinds of obligation. Second, the duty to moral perfection does not apply to itself in such a way that an infinite regress is generated: it is true that the duty to moral perfection is a second-order duty in the sense that we are obligated to strive to have a pure disposition when fulfilling first-order duties to perform actions, but it is not clear how the duty to strive to have a pure disposition would generate a further ‘duty to strive to have a pure disposition when striving to have a pure disposition’ and so on *ad infinitum*. Indeed, in the *Foundations of Ethics* Ross himself admits that “one of his [the human being’s] most important duties” is “cultivating the sense of duty” (1939, 122), and claims that such a duty does not give rise to a regress because it merely asserts that we should cultivate our sense of duty, not perform our duties from duty. (1939, 122)

### **3. Kant’s Explicit Response: Psychological Implausibility and the ‘Ought Implies Can’ Principle**

In the previous section my aim was only to clarify the two positions that scholars have mistakenly, or so I have argued, thought to commit Kant to the existence of a duty to act from duty. Even if I have been persuasive, however, one might respond by citing additional passages or positions which seem to commit Kant to such a duty. In this section I illustrate that such attempts

would be in vain, for Kant explicitly, albeit not obviously, acknowledges the possibility of such a duty and rejects it. Furthermore, I suggest that Kant's rejection of the duty to act from duty is significant because it reveals that the primary problem with such a duty is not the generation of a regress, but rather the implausible psychological view it presupposes, namely that of being able to choose one's motives at will.

Kant explicitly entertains and subsequently rejects the possibility of a duty to act from duty in *The Metaphysics of Morals* when discussing respect as one of the four 'aesthetic preconditions of the mind's receptivity to concepts of duty in general'. (6:399) However, what Kant says there is only clear in the context of his foregoing discussion of the meaning of the saying 'you ought to love your neighbour as yourself.' (6:402; see also 5:83) In that discussion, Kant argues that "*Love* is a matter of *feeling*, not of willing, and I cannot love because I *will* to, still less because I *ought* to (I cannot be constrained to love); so a *duty to love* is an absurdity." (6:401) The idea here is that a command or a duty to love, in the sense of a requirement to have the pathological feeling,<sup>xiii</sup> violates the 'ought implies can' principle: as Kant says in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, "it is not within the power of any human being to love someone merely on command" (5:83). Indeed, it is not within our power to have *any* feeling at will or by choice, thus a command to do so is an absurdity because it requires the impossible. It is in this context that Kant adds, in the section on respect, that a duty to feel respect would be absurd for the same reason, namely because respect is "something merely subjective, a feeling of a special kind, not a judgement about an object that it would be a duty to bring about or promote." (6:402)<sup>xiii</sup> Thus, a duty to act from respect, that is, a duty to act from duty, also violates the 'ought implies can' principle: it requires something that is psychologically impossible, namely the ability bring about a feeling at will.<sup>xiv</sup>

Although Kant does not discuss the possibility of a duty to act from duty at length, his reason for rejecting it is interesting: the main problem Kant sees with such a duty is not any kind of regress that might result, it is that the duty would require the impossible. As it happens, and as I mentioned earlier, this is Ross's first argument against a moral obligation to act from a good motive. As Ross explains in the *Foundations of Ethics*:

neither opinion nor desire is under our immediate control, thus it cannot be my duty to have any sort of desire, because I cannot by choice produce this desire forthwith in myself, any more than I can by choice produce any other desire. ... I can cultivate motives; but I cannot manufacture them at a moment's notice. (1939, 115f.)

Importantly, this argument is broader than Ross's 'infinite regress argument': whereas the regress only arises from a duty to act from a specific motive, namely the sense of duty, *any* duty to act from a good motive, whatever that motive may be, implies "a psychological impossibility" (1939, 120) and thus violates the 'ought implies can' principle. Kant agrees in that he believes that both a duty to feel love and a duty to feel respect are problematic for the same reason, namely they require the impossible.

There is good reason why Kant identifies psychological impossibility as the main issue with a duty to act from duty, and not any kind of regress: violating the 'ought implies can' principle is the primary problem with any duty to act from a particular motive. In the case of the duty to act from duty, even if either kind of regress resulted from it, the duty would still require what is psychologically impossible; put differently, the duty would violate the 'ought implies can' principle whether a regress is generated or not. Thus, in one sense the regresses thought to result from this duty are beside the point and would only be a real concern if it were possible for us to do what the duty requires in the first place, namely choose our motives. Since choosing our feelings and desires at will is psychologically impossible, the plausibility of a duty to act from duty ends here and there is no need to address either version of the regress.

## Conclusion

One might be concerned that rather than resolve a potentially serious problem for Kant's ethics I have instead left it in a worse position than when I found it, for in arguing that Kant believes it is psychologically impossible to act from duty at will, one might think that this eliminates the possibility of moral improvement and the moral worth of our will is no longer within our control. This is not the case, however. To be clear, Kant thinks that the moral motive is *available* to all human beings almost by default: as he argues in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, any rational agent who has even considered acting on a principle is conscious of the moral law (5:29-30), and human beings are so constituted that we necessarily feel respect (the moral motive) whenever we are conscious of the moral law. (see 5:80, for example) What is psychologically impossible, for Kant, is choosing to make the necessarily available moral motive *efficacious* at will in a given instant. This is not within our control, thus we cannot be morally required to do it.<sup>xv</sup> What *is* in our control, and what we *are* morally required to do, however, is strive to perfect our will such that this motive is efficacious, as I have illustrated above.

With respect to *how* exactly we go about improving our will, in the end Kant agrees with Ross. According to Ross, “The most that we could possibly effectively choose would be to perform certain activities, either of action or of thought, which would gradually lead to the substitution of the one motive for the other”. (Ross 1939, 120) Similarly, in the case of love, for example, Kant argues that

the saying “you ought to *love* your neighbour as yourself” does not mean that you ought immediately (first) to love him and (afterwards) by means of this love do good to him. It means, rather, *do good* to your fellow human beings, and your beneficence will produce love of them in you (as an aptitude of the inclination to beneficence in general). (6:402)

Although this is not the place to address the topic in detail, Kant’s doctrine of moral education is similar to what he says here about love: an important stage of moral progress is “permissible moral illusion” (7:151), according to which humans “adopt the illusion ... of respect for others”, that is, they act merely in conformity with duty under the illusion they are acting from respect, when they are in fact acting from other motives. According to Kant: “it is also very good that this happens in the world. For when human beings play these roles, eventually the virtues, whose illusion they have merely affected for a considerable length of time, will gradually really be aroused and merge into the disposition.” (7:151 and see 7:293)

Rather than ‘the great exemplar’ of a figure who holds that we are morally obligated to act from the sense of duty, then, Kant agrees with Ross that our duty is to perform actions only, and not to also act from a specific motive. Indeed, we have seen that Kant calls the motive of duty “meritorious” and not “owed” (6:390) for precisely this reason: acting *from duty* goes beyond what we owe and is what gives our action moral worth. One might therefore say that Kant and Ross agree that the right and the good are distinct, and it should be mentioned that Ross seems to have eventually acknowledged this himself: in Ross’s commentary on the *Groundwork*, written after *The Right and the Good*, there is no mention of the regress problem, nor is there any claim that Kant believes we have a duty to act from duty. (see Ross 1954 and Beck 1955, 98n) Not only this, but in the later *Foundations of Ethics* Ross discusses the “ancestry” of the view he argues for there, namely that we are only ever obligated to do certain acts and never to act from certain motives (see 144ff.), and he explicitly identifies Kant as maintaining such a view:

I believe that he [Kant] consistently describes action from a sense of duty not as the only action that is right, but as the only action that has moral worth, thus making the motive (or, as he prefers to call

it, the principle or maxim of action) the ground of moral goodness, but the nature of the action apart from its motive the ground of its rightness. (1939, 139)

In the end, then, Ross came to see that there is no duty to act from duty for Kant, and I hope that my efforts in this paper might convince others of the same.<sup>xvi</sup>

*Martin Luther University*

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<sup>i</sup> See esp. Allison (1990, Ch. 6); Herman (1981); and Ameriks (1989)

<sup>ii</sup> In the *Foundations of Ethics*, Ross presents two further problems associated with an obligation to act from a good motive (see 193, 123-4) but they are not relevant to my purposes in this paper.

<sup>iii</sup> Marcus Willaschek is another who describes the regress in this way; see (1997, pg. 211-212).

<sup>iv</sup> See Cameron (2018) for these two ways in which an infinite regress can be vicious.

<sup>v</sup> To my knowledge, Paul Guyer (2010 and 2000, 304) is the only one who has addressed this obligation in any significant detail. As I will illustrate in what follows, I disagree with Guyer’s interpretation in important respects.

<sup>vi</sup> References to Kant’s works cite the volume, page, and occasionally line number of the Prussian (and later German) Academy Edition of his *Gesammelte Schriften*. I use the translations of Kant’s texts available in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* and I indicate where these translations have been modified.

<sup>vii</sup> The following passage from the *Groundwork* is a good example: “The objective necessity of an action from obligation is called duty.” (4:439.33–4, see also 6:222)

<sup>viii</sup> Korsgaard (1996, 44) interprets Kant as distinguishing between duty and obligation in the same way.

<sup>ix</sup> My interpretation of what I have called the general obligation of virtue differs from Guyer’s (2000, 2010). Guyer suggests that it be conceived not as a general obligation *of* virtue, but as an obligation *to* virtue, that is, an obligation to be virtuous in one’s disposition or “to make respect for duty our fundamental maxim”. (Guyer 2000, 304) Although Guyer’s view aligns with mine in that he takes this obligation to signify “a necessary condition for the fulfillment of ... particular duties”, he adds that, “for that reason, it is something that can be demanded of them [human beings] as itself a duty.” (2010, 215) However, conceiving of this general obligation as a duty proper is to think of it in precisely the way that brings about a regress, as happens in Guyer’s discussion (see 2010, 211 and 217), and which leads to its associated interpretive and philosophical problems.

<sup>x</sup> One way of characterizing how the general obligation of virtue handles the regress problem is to say that, as an *obligation*, the duty to act from duty is a different *kind* of obligation from normal duties. For those who have responded to the regress problem in similar ways, though not on behalf of Kant, see Shillinglaw (1933, 215) and Ewing (1948, 142ff.).

<sup>xi</sup> For similar accounts of the duty to moral perfection and how it might avoid the regress, see Allison (1990, 178), Guyer (2010, 231), and Willaschek (1997, 213).

<sup>xii</sup> That Kant is talking about the *feeling* of love is significant, because strictly speaking only ‘pathological love’ cannot be commanded. What *can* be commanded is ‘practical love’, which is good deeds towards others and thus an action or set of actions and *not* a feeling.

<sup>xiii</sup> That Kant calls respect a “self-wrought” (4:401n) feeling should not suggest that it is any more in our control than pathological feelings that are “received by influence” (4:401n): respect is “*self-wrought* by a rational concept” (4:401n), namely the moral law, and Kant is clear that respect arises *necessarily* from the moral law (see 5:78) just as respect for persons “is a tribute that we cannot refuse to pay to merit, whether we want to or not”. (5:77)

<sup>xiv</sup> I take my reading of Kant’s version of the ought implies can principle to be consistent with that of Robert Stern (2004) who argues that rather than believing in a strong version of the principle, according to which the content of the moral law is determined by our capacities, Kant subscribes to a weaker version, according to which “an agent can only be under an obligation ... if he has the ability to do it.” (2004, 58)

<sup>xv</sup> There is at least one further reason why a duty to make the moral motive *efficacious* in a given instant is impossible on Kant’s view, namely it would violate his doctrine of motivational opacity: a moral requirement to make respect efficacious presupposes our ability to confirm that we fulfilled such a requirement, which



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would require insight into our dispositions. Given Kant is clear that our true motives are inaccessible to us (see for example 6:392-3, 6:447, and 4:407), a narrow duty requiring that we choose our motives seems ruled out on this ground as well.

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