Balancing commitments: Own-happiness and beneficence[1]

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Abstract: There is a familiar problem in moral theories that recognize positive obligations to help others related to the practical room these obligations leave for ordinary life, and the risk that open-ended obligations to help others will consume our lives and resources. Responding to this problem, Kantians have tended to emphasize the idea of limits on positive obligations but are typically unsatisfactorily vague about the nature and extent of these limits. I argue here that aspects of Kant's discussion of duties of virtue owed to ourselves suggest a useful metric we can use in discussing these limits and that generalizing this account and combining it with elements of Barbara Herman's view, offers us an attractive model of moral deliberation with the resources we need to engage the critic's challenge properly.

There is a familiar problem in moral theories that recognize positive obligations to help others related to the practical room that these obligations leave for ordinary life. Given the open-ended nature of these commitments and the priority typically assigned to moral requirements, critics claim that obligations to aid will consume our time and efforts, threatening to reduce us to the status of "warehouses of potentially distributable skills and possessions" (Herman 2007, p. 215) to be redistributed to the benefit of the less fortunate. This problem is immediately apparent in consequentialist theories committed to the simple maximization of impersonal good but also arises quickly in deontological views committed to some degree of positive aid in a world in which others are routinely in often very grave need.

In Kantian ethics, discussions of this concern have tended to focus on the latitude associated with imperfect obligations said to be implied by Kant's description of these as duties of "wide obligation" and by his remark that a "narrow" perfect duty is one that "admits of no exception in

favor of inclination" (GW 4:421). Broadly speaking, two strategies emerge in response. Some commentators, notably Thomas E. Hill, interpret Kant's remarks to imply that wide imperfect duties *do* admit of such exceptions and argue that, while we have standing and serious obligations to render aid, we are nonetheless permitted to sometimes forgo opportunities to aid others merely because we happen to prefer to do something else. In contrast, commentators like Jens Timmermann and Barbara Herman argue that imperfect duties are "wide" only in the sense that they do not narrowly specify particular actions required in all circumstances. They deny that imperfect duties admit of exceptions on the basis of self-interest and argue, instead, that other grounds of obligation, including indirect obligations to promote our own happiness, set limits on our duties to aid others.

What these different responses have in common is an emphasis on the form or structure of our obligations that tends to come at the expense of substantive discussion of actual limits and priorities. The problem with this is that the demandingness objection concerns the *practical extent* of our obligations not just their form and it is not enough merely to argue that obligations of aid admit of *some* limits. Commentators typically agree that the Kantian duty of beneficence imposes universally binding obligations of aid and remains a demanding commitment representing, as Hill puts it, "a major, serious, always potentially relevant moral consideration" (Hill 2002, p.203). An adequate response to the problem needs to address questions about the nature and practical implications of these limits directly and, however they are understood, we need some reason to be confident that Kantian ethics can strike a plausible balance between serious obligations to aid those in grave need and the importance of conscientious moral agents having room for a recognizably human life.

Given this concern, Barbara Herman's response is distinctive. Like other commentators she focuses primarily on the structure of obligations to aid while also acknowledging the basic universality and seriousness of the obligation associated with Kantian beneficence, explicitly acknowledging that we have an "indeterminate obligation to all persons that bears on their need" (Herman 2007, p. 226) and agreeing that this general obligation can require us to respond to unmet needs both domestically and abroad. She also, however, directly addresses the question of practical scope, arguing that we are morally entitled to prioritize our own concerns and the interests of those we care about over even the dire needs of strangers and, strikingly, that that in doing so *we need not think of ourselves as weighing or balancing the relative priorities of different moral considerations in deciding how to act*.

I think that problems with Herman's account illustrate the limits of structural response like this. I argue that the changes in the way we understand our commitment to our own happiness and the organic model of moral development and deliberation she adopts do not suffice to dispense with the need for balancing competing interests and that the critic's problem cannot be solved without this kind of comparative weighing. I think, however, that elements of Herman's account have much to offer and that other aspects of the same discussion of duties of virtue that she appeals to in developing her response suggest a useful metric we can use in weighing competing interests and priorities. I claim that Kant's classification of the duties of virtue owed to ourselves in terms of different kinds of concerns with our *moral health* and *moral prosperity* suggests a natural way of understanding our moral priorities, and that generalizing this account and combining it with elements of Herman's structural changes, offers us an attractive model of moral deliberation with the resources we need to engage the critic's challenge properly.

I

At the center of Herman's response is a distinctive account of the role of obligatory ends in moral life and of the connection between these ends and the natural end of one's own happiness. In the *Metaphysics of Morals,* Kant argues that the possibility of categorical moral requirements entails that some ends are given unconditionally as rational ends we ought to endorse and pursue (Kant, 1991, 6:385). He claims that these ends are our own perfection[2] and the happiness of others, and associates these with various duties of virtue, including the duty of beneficence. In Chapter 9 of *Moral Literacy,* Herman suggests that these obligatory ends specify the material requirements of respect for rational nature in ourselves and others and serve as the ultimate measure of the choice worthiness of *any* of our other merely discretionary ends.[3]

She argues that this obligatory concern with the end of our own perfection encompasses a broad range of concerns with the effectiveness of our moral agency, including concerns with our material well-being and our capacity to enjoy life more typically associated with the pursuit of happiness. She emphasizes that we come to maturity as moral agents through a complex development process and that our effective moral agency depends on a degree of material and psychological well-being. By requiring such concerns, Herman argues that a commitment to the obligatory end of our own perfection brings "own-happiness" directly "into the space of moral reasons," (Herman 2007, p. 213) and that what may otherwise seem self-regarding concerns gain moral significance and may sometimes have priority over the interests, and even needs, of others.

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[2] The perfection of talents that serve to make us more effective agents and of the purity of our moral disposition (our capacity to listen to the requirements of reason and respond appropriately).

[3] This is not, she stresses, to suggest that we must always act directly in the service of one or other of these obligatory ends. As long as we are acting in ways that are consistent with the terms of this respect, our current ends are still answerable to these obligatory ends and we need not therefore always be acting directly for their sake.

Combining the organic model of moral deliberation she develops elsewhere[4] with the idea of moral literacy that frames this later work, she stresses that we should think of these obligatory ends as naturally framing the mature moral agent's deliberative field and already informing and animating her conception of her own happiness. She argues the developmental process our effective rational agency depends on begins with, and works through, the natural desire for our own happiness - "the vehicle that drives the development of human rational agency" (Herman 2007, p. 216), by prompting us to reflect on what we want from life and how we may secure it. This evolving conception of our own happiness also develops, however, in the light of the basic moral literacy Herman thinks we inherit from our rational nature and therefore under the influence of a developing commitment to the obligatory ends of our own perfection and the happiness of others:

> ... rationality is not an "add-on" to an independent, non-rational course of development. The fact that we are rational alters the desires we come to have: not just which objects we pursue, but the content and structure of the desires we act on" (Herman 2007, p. 193).

These obligatory ends thus inform and animate the agent's developing conception of her own happiness and come to frame the mature moral agent's deliberative field and, in doing so, introduce "positive moral conditions on the pursuit of happiness" (Herman 2007, p. 213). Rather than thinking of ourselves as trying to balance the demands of reason against competing natural desires for our own happiness, we therefore think of our conception of happiness as *evolving under the influence of,* and *being shaped by,* fundamental and pervasive commitments to these

[4] See, for example, "Making Room for Character" (Herman 2007, Chapter 1), and "Agency, Attachment & Difference" (Herman 1997, Chapter 9).

obligatory ends woven into the fabric of our lives and the way we understand ourselves and our projects.[5]

As Herman understands it, the relationship between morality and own-happiness is therefore a complex one in which our own happiness is directly relevant from the moral point of view and our conception of our happiness evolves to reflect and incorporate our moral commitments at the same time as these commitments take on concerns we identify with our own happiness. In this context, Herman thinks of moral kindness as an interest developing organically as the natural expression of morally sanctioned concern we come to have for those we live with and care about: a concern that is, as such, already deeply connected with our conception of our own well-being. In this way, she thinks of moral kindness firstly as the natural expression of regard we have for our loved ones, friends, and those in our communities. She acknowledges that the obligation here still includes, and requires, concern with those who are distant from us, including those in dire need elsewhere in the world, but argues that it does not begin from the fact of abstract need and take this as the sole, or even the primary, measure of obligation.

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[5] As Andrews Reath notes, Herman's account therefore moralizes happiness. Obligatory ends "transform natural desires into forms of valuing that are responsive to reasons" (Reath, p.10) shaping our evolving desires and in this way:

> We can come to take pleasure in forms of work, leisure activity or human relationships that provide occasions for rational development (broadly construed), and be indifferent to those that do not. The flourishing of others that we care about can become integral to our own well-being, and so on. (Reath, p.10)

At the same time, however, morality is humanized and personalized by taking the things we care about and the interests and relationships we grow into seriously on their own terms. Herman stresses that we develop in response to our circumstances in particular communities and our interests and relationships and the conception of our own happiness we build around these reflect these communities and the choices that we make. Because these interests and relationships are also shaped by our commitment to the ends of our own perfection and the happiness of others, they can come to develop in appropriately reason responsive ways and thus to have a place on their own terms in a life shaped and informed by moral value. At the same time, however, these interests and relationships grow out of our particular circumstances and individual choices, reflecting the personal priorities, commitments, and relationships we have come to value as individuals and have a place in our lives on their own terms.

Reasoning in this way, Herman concludes that interests associated with own-happiness can have priority over the interests of others, and strikingly, that they can do so without our having to think of ourselves as weighing or balancing interests against each other:

> ...the salutary effect of locating the argument for beneficence under an obligatory end is to transform the way concern for self is connected to concern for others so that judgment need not be about adjudicating between own- and others'-happiness by means of the weighing and balancing of kinds of interests and numbers of persons (Herman 2007, p. 219).

II

There is a great deal here that is helpful, but I do not think that Herman succeeds in avoiding the need for balancing or that it is possible for Kantians to do so. Initially, Herman's response appears merely to shift the balancing required to one that takes place within morality, making own-happiness relevant from the moral point of view and requiring us to weigh considerations of own-happiness against different moral considerations owed to others. She seems, however, to also distance her view from this kind of balancing. Having argued that the obligatory end of one's own perfection imposes limits on our obligations to promote the well-being of others permitting us to sometimes prefer our own interests, she claims it is nonetheless a mistake to object that "one must resort to some sort of balancing after all," and that doing so "misses the point" of the structural change she proposes (Herman 2007, p. 218).

She gives two reasons for this claim, neither of which seems to support it. She argues that weighing is inappropriate because some goods are essential to the effectiveness of our agency suggesting, for example, that:

> If education is a necessity in some context for effective agency, then it (or the wherewithal to support it) is not available for distribution to others. Whether one may sacrifice such a resource for the sake of others is not, then entirely discretionary (Herman 2007, p. 218).

Returning to the same theme in discussing the latitude associated with imperfect duties, she emphasizes that the concern with our own perfection is not meant to simply shift an abstract

moral balance to be struck between our own pursuits and the interests of others in favor of the former and that decisions here will require, instead, circumstance specific individual judgement. She stresses that a concern with the effectiveness of moral agency makes the pursuit of happiness morally significant but does not thereby specify any uniquely proper concept of happiness ("as if the determination of what makes my life go well were to be made impersonally," Herman 2007, p. 218). What matters is that I be able to learn and grow from my own experiences, developing the skills and understanding essential to my effective moral agency, and that *I* be reasonably content with *my* life in a way that allows me to be connected with it and engaged by moral concerns. Within limits, how I choose to do this is up to me and we cannot therefore specify in advance the content of our imperfect duties. Instead decisions we make concerning the pursuit of our own happiness and our obligations to help others will require individual judgement in particular situations reflecting the specific interests and relationships individuals form and invest themselves in rather than the application of any general balancing rule or metric[6].

The problem is that neither the appeal to necessity nor the emphasis on individual judgement obviates the need to deliberate about how to act and decide between different concerns. We may agree that goods like a basic education are necessary for effective moral agency, but we can presumably make analogous claims of necessity on behalf of the essential needs of others and will therefore still find ourselves in the situation of having to adjudicate between competing claims, in this case to necessary goods associated with our different obligatory ends. Indeed, Herman stresses that the special status afforded to the pursuit of our own happiness on the basis of connections between own-happiness and rational functioning applies equally to the happiness

[6] Herman suggests that the latitude associated with imperfect duties is to be found in this space left for choices about how we want to live (rather than in the idea that these obligations sometimes allow for exceptions in the name of self-interest).

of others. We can therefore presumably make equally compelling claims of necessity on behalf of similarly basic needs essential to other's agency and happiness. These claims will also come in different degrees with different levels of urgency and we cannot view ourselves as simply entitled to prioritize our own needs. We cannot therefore avoid the questions we confront here without a great deal more discussion and, it seems, without weighing the character and relative importance and priority of even essential goods.

Similarly, while we may well think of obligations to help others as being affected by our relationships, the kind of circumstance specific individual reflection and judgement that Herman emphasizes will still involve choices about whose interests to prioritize and pursue. The reflective and morally engaged Kantian cannot just take the relationships they find themselves in and the commitments these entail for granted and simply assume they have priority in their moral life. Given limited time and resources, we will routinely have to choose between doing something we enjoy or helping people we care about and giving aid to strangers who are poor and less fortunate. The choices we must make here are at the heart of the problem and emphasizing individual variation and the importance of place and time again does not affect the basic dynamic of the problem: we still confront the need to prioritize moral commitments and cannot, it seems, defend the priority of personal interests without engaging in the kind of comparative judgements that Herman seems concerned to distance herself from.

Notice also that this is true even if we think of the obligation to meet the basic needs of strangers as primarily a matter of justice. Here, and in her later work on gratitude, Herman stresses the systematization of our moral obligations and the role of justice in meeting essential needs. She also, however, explicitly accepts that we can inherit "secondary obligations" of beneficence owed towards distant others whose needs have not been met by the institutions

primarily responsible for their care and therefore considers whether people living in the more affluent developed world are obligated to provide aid to people in desperate need in other parts of the world. Given the routine and continuing failure of domestic and international institutions of justice to care for the very poor, this kind of case is the usual focus in discussions of the background questions here about the decency of our lives and the practical extent of our obligations to help others and Herman's response is striking but inconclusive. Although she treats the obligation to provide aid in these cases as one belonging in the first instance to the domestic government in place, she accepts that we can inherit potentially very extensive obligations to aid through our obligatory commitment to the end of others' happiness and the "indeterminate obligation to all persons" associated with this commitment (Herman, 2007, p. 226). She treats these inherited obligations, however, as "secondary," and claims that they must "fit" with domestic "primary" obligations of beneficence arising from our commitments within our own communities and "with our morally required concern for ourselves," suggesting that:

> For this reason, not only will the general duty to others be limited, in order to meet our primary duties of beneficence, we may also be required to expend resources on higher-function needs close to us rather than on more basic needs at a distance (Herman, 2007, p. 227).

Without some further discussion of the relative priorities here it is not, however, clear why "fit" must be in this direction. Assume that we are both subject to a general obligation to help others and that you have incurred, in addition, a special obligation to support someone else (because, say, you promised to do so). Imagine now that you are unable or unwilling to meet your obligations to this person and that it falls on me to do so. It is not clear why we should think of my obligation here as an "inherited" and "secondary" obligation subordinate to *whatever* prior commitments I happen to have. This is surely a question of the relative priorities of the interests at stake and, while it is true that the additional burden on me needs to "fit" with my other

obligations, we cannot simply assume that "fit" means "comes after." Indeed, it is *precisely* this question of fit that is at the heart of concerns about the decency of our lives and the scope of our obligations to help others.

The critic concerned with demandingness will therefore simply argue that moralizing own-happiness and emphasizing the importance of situational judgement merely shifts the conflict to one within morality and personalizes it without actually addressing the central concern with marginalization. They will be similarly skeptical about Herman's emphasis on the importance of moral culture and the organic development of moral commitment. Stressing that Kantian moral agents act deliberately with some understanding of the moral character of their choices and are committed to the equal status of all persons, they will argue that we cannot take for granted the norms we inherit and the relationships and commitments we grow into. From the critic's point of view, we need to be able to reflectively endorse the personal interests and relationships we care about and to argue, not just that these concerns count from the moral point of view, but that they *count enough* to have priority in a range of key cases over the routinely extensive needs and interests of more distant others. This cannot be accomplished without some articulated account of the relative priorities to be afforded to different needs and interests of persons in different circumstances and relationships, and therefore without engaging in the kind of weighing and balancing Herman seems concerned to forgo.

III

While I think that Herman is right to think of own-happiness as having moral value and that her organic model of moral development and deliberation is a promising one, I therefore also think that her account illustrates the limits of structural responses to this problem. An adequate response to the demandingness objection must address the issue of practical limits and priorities

more directly and cannot avoid the need to weigh competing claims on our times and resources that is at the heart of the concern here. I think, however, that other aspects of Kant's discussion of obligatory ends and duties of virtue suggest a natural way of understanding our priorities oriented around the same kinds of concerns with own-happiness that Herman stresses. I think that combining this account with elements of Herman's model of moral deliberation and her emphasis on individual specific circumstances offers us an account of the limits of obligations to help others with the resources we need to engage the issues here.

Having identified the obligatory ends of our own perfection and the happiness of others, Kant goes on to classify various different duties of virtue around these commitments. In the case of duties of virtue owed to ourselves, he distinguishes between (negative and formal) *perfect* duties associated with concerns with our *moral health* and (positive and material) *imperfect* duties concerned with *moral prosperity* (MS 6:419).[7] Duties concerned with ensuring *moral health* require respect for the necessary conditions of *the possibility* of moral agency in human beings and prohibit actions like drunkenness that compromise our basic capacity to govern ourselves on the basis of reason rather than self-love (our capacity for "inner freedom"). These duties are then contrasted with imperfect duties oriented around concerns with ensuring our *moral prosperity* or flourishing, focused, more positively, on respect for conditions necessary for *the effective exercise* of rational agency in choice and action.

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[7] Kant contrasts formal and perfect duties concerned with our "moral self-preservation" with positive and imperfect duties concerned with our "perfecting" ourselves and suggests that:

> The first belong to the moral health (*ad esse*) of a human being as object of both his outer sense and his inner sense, to the preservation of his nature in its perfection (as receptivity). The second belong to his moral prosperity (*ad melius esse, opulentia moralis*), which consists in possessing a capacity sufficient for all his ends, insofar as this can be acquired; they belong to his cultivation (active perfecting) of himself (MS, 6:419).

In the case of perfect duties of virtue owed to ourselves, Kant distinguishes between duties prohibiting vices like drunkenness and suicide owed to ourselves "as animal and moral beings" concerned with our general capacity to use our powers purposively in choice and action and those owed to ourselves as “moral beings only,” concerned more directly with our capacity to exercise specifically rational self-control. Given our natural tendency to be powerfully influenced by our desires, Kant thinks that the possibility of rational self-constraint in human beings depends on vigilance and strength of will and describes “the state of health in the moral life” as one requiring the possession of a “tranquil mind” capable of deliberating properly free from undue influence by affects, passions, and strong desires, together with a “considered and firm resolve to put the law of virtue into practice” (MS, 6:409). The various vices contrary to duties owed to ourselves as moral beings only that Kant discusses then reflect concerns with the necessary conditions of this kind of tranquil mind and personal resolve.

These duties encompass exactly the kind of concerns with the psychological dynamics of human agency that Herman emphasizes.[8] So, for example, Kant associates a perfect duty prohibiting miserly avarice with concerns with our moral health, describing the relevant vice in terms of a “slavish subjection of oneself to the goods that contribute to happiness” (MS, 6:434) and contrasting it with greedy avarice violating duties of beneficence owed to others. Earlier he notes that “adversity, pain and want are great temptations to violate one's duty” (MS, 6:388), and, that while “to seek prosperity for its own sake is not directly a duty,” “indirectly it can well be a duty, that of warding off poverty insofar as this is a great temptation to vice” (one whose

[8] For a more comprehensive discussion of Kant’s treatment of these duties see Wilson 2007. I argue here that all of the various duties of virtue that Kant discusses in the Metaphysics of Morals, including duties of respect and love owed to others, should be regarded as oriented around concerns with ensuring our capacity for moral agency, and that this suggests an attractive and subtle account encompassing a range of psychological and social concerns.

end is “not my happiness but the preservation of my moral integrity” (MS, 6:389). Echoing the same theme he argues that miserly avarice restricts “*one’s own* enjoyment of the means to good living so narrowly as to leave one’s own true needs unsatisfied” (MS, 6:432) thereby “depriving oneself of the comforts necessary to enjoy life” (MS, 6:433). The picture developed here and in Kant's discussion of the same vice in his *Lectures on Ethics* is then one of a psychologically dysfunctional life of damaging self-deprivation oriented around the continual acquisition and obsessive hoarding of goods whose proper value lies in their use as means to the end of enjoyment. A life of “slavish subjection” to material goods in which all the agent’s decisions are weighed in terms of this overarching goal and in which their capacity to reason about how they *ought to* act is profoundly compromised.[9]

Importantly, however, the contrast here between perfect duties requiring respect for necessary conditions of the possibility of moral agency and imperfect obligations oriented around concerns with the effective exercise of this agency also suggests a way of distinguishing between different moral concerns and understanding the limits of special consideration afforded to our own interests and happiness. Given this contrast, it seems reasonable to suggest that in respecting our own moral natures we ought to give priority to the former in cases where we have to choose. So, for example, given the need for us to develop the core skill sets essential to the realization of our moral nature and the possible psychological importance of being able to pursue

[9] In the Lectures on Ethics, Kant suggests that miserly avarice often begins with a reasonable effort at prudent resource management that is distorted over time eventually becoming a kind of mania for possession that causes us to lose touch with the proper value of possessions as means to other ends. The miser gradually reduces his life to one oriented solely around the empty hoarding of material goods, becoming obsessively concerned with keeping what he has and increasing his stock. Approaching all his decisions with these overriding interests to the fore, he forgoes the normal range of social pleasures and finds himself, instead, always “occupied with anxious cares” about his possessions (LE, 27:401) that come to pervade his choices and dominate his life.

particular educational interests central to one's sense of self, an interest in securing some educational opportunities can reasonably be regarded as relevantly connected with concerns with moral health. Similarly, given the dependence of our capacity for rational self-control on our general psychological health, the required concern with conditions of moral health will readily encompass key concerns with our ability to develop and sustain the kind of close personal relationships and core commitments ordinarily essential to human well-being and necessary if we are to be able to identify with our lives and care about how we live and what we do. Viewed in this way, it is plausible to suggest that in thinking about how we ought to live interests like these connected with concerns with our moral health and essential to our capacity for moral agency should have priority over concerns with the general perfection of our talents and the pursuit of less central interests of own-happiness connected with considerations of moral prosperity.

While it will be generally up to the agent to decide for herself which relationships and interests are central to her, the classification of these duties in terms of the idea of concerns with moral health and moral prosperity will also serve to inform the nature and limits of any special consideration afforded to them on these grounds. So, for example, conscientious moral agents considering prioritizing opportunities that go beyond the basic education necessary to equip them to understand their obligations and manage their affairs need to sincerely regard these opportunities as central to their sense of self and well-being and, even then, will be expected to consider the relative costs of their pursuit. Reflecting in this way, they may find themselves required to concede that the opportunity in question cannot reasonably be regarded as a privileged interest connected with conditions of their agency. Even when the case for this kind of priority can be made, concerns related to our moral health will take different forms, some will be more urgent and less malleable than others and we could still sometimes be required to postpone

or modify our interests if the present costs of their pursuit are too high. So, for example, responsible moral agents committed to respect for the conditions of their own agency will have reason to prioritize immediate and more urgent needs for basic welfare over longer term educational needs and to sometimes adjust even core interests in an effort to render them more compatible with their other commitments.

The division of duties into duties concerned with necessary conditions of moral agency and those concerned with the effective exercise of this agency thus offers an important refinement to Herman's broader notion of general conditions of effective agency, one that allows us to discriminate between interests and to understand the special moral priority attaching to some interests. I propose that we generalize this understanding of concerns with agency and use the distinction between concerns with agents' moral health and their moral prosperity to inform the broader weighing of interests that seems to be required.

As Herman stresses, the object of duties of beneficence owed to others is not their well-being per se but rather their agency:

> Neither the satisfaction of desire per se nor the promotion of any arbitrary conception of happiness could obligate us. If [others'] well-being matters, it will be because of its connection with the core value of rational agency (Herman, 2007, p. 215).

I suggest, therefore, that we think of the requirement to respect others' agency associated with the obligation to make their happiness our end as being similarly divided into perfect obligations concerned with conditions of the possibility of moral agency and imperfect obligations concerned with its effective exercise. Doing so, and recognizing the priority attaching to concerns with conditions of moral health, affords us a way of better understanding the nature and limits of our obligations to others and promises the kind of resources we need if we are to adequately respond to the critic's challenge.

I propose, then, that we distinguish between perfect obligations requiring respect for necessary conditions of moral health that prohibit indifference to the essential conditions of others' moral agency and imperfect obligations requiring us to actively further others' moral prosperity (either directly by helping them in their pursuit of moral ends or indirectly by promoting their happiness and enriching their lives in ways that make moral commitment generally easier to develop and sustain).[10] Viewed in this way, the priorities required of us in simpler cases are relatively straightforward. Just as it seems plausible to claim that respect for our own moral agency requires us to prioritize concerns with necessary conditions of this agency over its perfection and the pursuit of other less central ends that serve merely to enrich our lives, it seems reasonable to claim that the same is true when we have to choose between these concerns and agency or happiness *promoting* interests of others. So, for example, just as the priority attaching to concerns with moral health suggests that I should not compromise key relationships in my life integral to my psychological health in order to further refine useful practical skills, I should similarly not do so in order to promote the ends of others in ways that might enrich their lives and contribute positively to their moral prosperity instead. Viewed in this way, we are therefore ordinarily entitled to favor the causes, projects, and relationships around which we build our lives over the discretionary interests of others in our communities and more

[10] Treating a requirement to provide for others' essential agency sustaining needs as a perfect duty represents a departure from the standard account of these duties as "negative" and "formal" obligations. Kant warns us in the *Groundwork*, however, that he is not committed to this standard model and departs significantly from it in describing perfect duties of virtue owed to ourselves in *The Metaphysics of Morals* as duties requiring the adoption of the end of our own perfection and as enjoining a range of positive commitments to virtues like honest self-reflection and proper self-respect and to other conditions necessary if we are to sustain our basic capacity for moral agency. More generally, even more standard examples of negative perfect duties implicitly have positive aspects - the duty prohibiting false promises, for example, is met only by *keeping* our promises and *doing* whatever we have undertaken to do – again suggesting that it is an oversimplification to think of these duties as defined narrowly by omission. For a more comprehensive discussion of the account I propose and what it suggests about the interpretation of some key formal elements of Kant's view, see Wilson, 2004.

distant strangers. By the same token, however, we must also be willing to sacrifice discretionary interests and projects of our own for the sake of considerations bearing on the moral health of others. We can reasonably claim some interests and key relationships are entitled to priority but the sincere Kantian cannot view this as a "blank check." They should be willing to reflect critically on their interests and priorities and recognize that many of these serve merely to enrich their lives and should be viewed as things they can reasonably be expected to sacrifice for the sake of more basic agency sustaining needs of others.

Harder choices will also have to be made in cases where we must decide between concerns with our own and others' moral health. In thinking of my family or core interests as having priority on the grounds of concerns with my moral health I commit myself to attaching the same priority to similarly necessary conditions of others' moral agency. Just as respect for the necessary conditions of our own moral health commits us to prioritizing our immediate agency sustaining needs over more flexible longer term needs, it will therefore similarly require that we prioritize the urgent needs of others over our own less pressing needs. Thus understood, I should think of myself as required to prioritize others' immediate needs for basic food or shelter over educational or other core commitments which I build my life around but which I can reasonably postpone or pursue incrementally in the longer term without significant loss. We will, however, also have to be mindful here of other obligations we have and to think carefully about the form of aid we offer. We do not realize our moral nature in acting in conformity with rational principles merely instrumentally in pursuit of some other goal or because we are moved to do so by custom or habit or by affects like fear, sympathy, love, etc.. We realize this nature, instead, only in conscious self-constraint reflecting a general commitment to prioritizing the requirements of reason over our other interests and must be free to make this commitment for ourselves, and to

develop the understanding and strength of character necessary to do so and to sustain it over time. Among other things, this will require that we be properly nurtured and protected as children in our early development and that when we reach maturity we have the freedom to decide for ourselves how we are to live and the space in which to learn to manage our own affairs. Concerns with respect for the conditions of our own and others' moral health will therefore also emphasize the importance of special obligations owed to children and a broad range of robust concerns with our general freedoms and our capacity for independent judgement. These and other similar considerations will then be reflected in the choices we make here about how to help others and will require us, for example, to avoid forms of aid likely to create harmful relations of dependence in which beneficiaries may see themselves as bound by, or beholden to, the wills of their benefactors.[11]

Importantly, however, the Kantian is not in the position of a utilitarian required to impartially survey the landscape of options and neutrally aim at the best outcome. The duties required here are principled obligations based on the formal moral requirement of respect for rational nature as this applies in the case of human agents who realize their rational nature *only* through the development and exercise of their capacity for inner freedom. Thinking of a realized capacity for inner freedom as the empirical form of rational nature in human beings, the suggestion is that in

[11] For a more comprehensive discussion of the form that respect for others' moral agency will take see [Wilson 2007, 2015]. I argue here that the relevant concerns with others' moral agency will require consideration of a broad range of material and social circumstances and psychological factors bearing on the capacity of others to order and control their lives in general and to realize their moral natures for themselves. These will include both concerns with adverse conditions incompatible with the development and realization of our moral agency and with those positively conducive to it. So, for example, the required concerns will commit us to basic norms of non-interference and to the kind of social world respectful of others' external freedom that Kant describes in the Doctrine of Right. More positively, however, these concerns will also include a broader range of norms enjoining an active sensitivity to the efforts of others to organize and control their own lives requiring us to aid them in the pursuit of permissible discretionary ends and to play our part in ensuring a public culture respectful of different choices and supportive of others' efforts to realize their moral natures for themselves.

our case the formal moral requirement of respect for the unconditioned value of rational agency takes the form of a requirement of respect for the conditions under which this freedom is possible and can flourish. To understand what this requires, we must take into account various facts about us that bear on our own and others' capacities for inner freedom, including facts about our basic needs and vulnerabilities and about the dependence of our moral agency on our psychological health. Doing so does not, however, commit us to thinking of a concern with this kind of freedom as a goal to be promoted. Nor is there any suggestion that the wrong here is contingent on the likelihood of actual harm to agency. What is required of us is that we act on maxims that express due respect for our own and others' rational natures. The relevant harms associated with concerns with moral health and moral prosperity serve to characterize the form of different wrongs but we act wrongly to the extent that our choices of maxims fail to express this proper respect whether or not our actions have the relevant bad consequences.

The weighing of interests required of the Kantian is not therefore the kind of simple aggregation of commensurable goods associated with the utilitarian model. The fact that I could protect more or greater agency by sacrificing central interests of my own is not decisive. Nor do the relevant Kantian concerns with necessary conditions of agency come with different commensurable weights attached to them. To the extent that it is reasonable to claim that interests like my relationship with my children are integral to my sense of self and moral agency, the actions necessary to secure these interests have a legitimate claim to moral priority on an equal footing with the agency sustaining claims of others. The fact that a stranger is starving therefore does not itself give them a greater claim to my time and resources than, say, my children have. Nor does the fact that I might be able to save ten strangers by sacrificing my children's interests. Instead, the sincere Kantian committed to respect for the necessary

conditions of their own and others' moral health and prosperity will think of herself as bound by principled norms appropriate for a community committed to respect for the *general* conditions under which moral agency is possible for human agents and can flourish in human communities. These norms will require us to prioritize agency sustaining needs over interests that serve to enrich life connected with our moral prosperity and, in situations where we must choose between different concerns with moral health, to put more urgent needs ahead of those that can be postponed. In doing so, they will also require us to think carefully about other obligations we may have in particular cases and about the form of aid we offer, but they do not simply require us to abandon our own core commitments in the pursuit of more optimal outcomes.

Notice also that we should not think of the kind of weighing of interests required here as a matter of explicit deliberation demanding constant moral evaluation of our relationships and commitments in the moment of choice. Relationships with our loved ones and commitments to defining ideals and projects are importantly constituted by, and dependent on, partiality and priority. We must be free to act directly from motives like these and they must be understood to have a place in our lives on their own terms. The suggestion here is not, then, that we are to constantly weigh the permissibility of actions that support these relationships and interests in the moment and act on them always only through the lens of impartial moral commitment. Instead, we should think of this kind of weighing as ordinarily taking place "behind the scenes" in moments of background critical moral reflection and deliberation. Committed to respect for the general conditions of moral health and prosperity, the sincere Kantian will seek to structure her life around the relevant norms and priorities, taking into account the need for human beings to develop a mature understanding of their own good and the dependence of our agency on a broad range of needs and interests, including those connected with our psychological health. Embedded

in her deliberative field, the priorities this commitment requires will come to color and shape the other interests she comes to have in the manner Herman envisages which will thus be valued independently on their own grounds at the same time as they are responsive to moral value. Thus understood, my love for my children evolves organically in the context of my life but does so in a way that is responsive to moral requirements and answerable to my background commitment to respect for the conditions of my own and others' moral health and prosperity. My relationships with those I love are then already informed by these commitments and, barring unusual circumstances, there is no expectation that I self-consciously weigh my options in the moment of action in my day-to-day conduct towards those I love.[12]

There is also no reason to think of the weighing required here as an algorithmic calculation permitting no variation in judgement or flexibility in different circumstances. Differences in culture and circumstances will mean that different agents can reasonably think of different interests as relevantly connected with concerns with moral health. So, for example, the way that personal and family relationships are understood will partly be a matter of culture and claims made on this basis may therefore vary. Different communities will think of the relationship

[12] Viewed in this way I can think of personal relationships formed in the ordinary conduct of my life as having appropriately direct non-moral value for me at the same time as I understand their place in the broader context of my moral life in terms of this direct and deeply partial value and its central role in the psychological integrity of normal human beings. In ordinary contexts, when asked by my spouse or children why I do things for them, I am not required to adopt the lofty and impartial perspective of morality – I can answer directly, and in perfectly good faith, that I do these things because I love them. At the same time, however, I understand that love has its limits, and, when asked in another context to defend my partiality as morally permissible, I can do so. Thus, when asked by my son to justify my preference for him over strangers, I can explain that relationships like ours are part of the deepest fabric of a human life and serve to define us and to connect us with our lives and with others. Responding in this way, I argue that within limits people are entitled to show special preferences for significant others, and that my deep and personal affection for him falls under the auspices of this kind of moral consideration. Far from devaluing my personal attachment, the fact that I can also justify personal commitment to him from my moral point of view seems only to add to its significance and value. For a longer discussion of the structure of these interests and the related concern with alienation, see Wilson 2009.

between children and aging parents or distant members of extended families differently and this will create different expectations to be met in these relationships which we will be entitled to consider prioritizing. The level of development and sophistication of a society will also affect which interests can reasonably be prioritized. So, for example, computer literacy, and familiarity with, and access to, the internet and to social media are increasingly becoming *basic* prerequisites integral to one's prospects in life in more affluent developed societies. Technologies like these are also things that people increasingly have to understand and utilize in order to properly appreciate and be responsive to developing moral concerns in modern societies. In some circumstances, then, education about, and access to, resources and goods like these could therefore reasonably be seen as connected with the kind of key interests and basic moral competencies associated with concerns with moral health rather than just as things that enrich our lives but which we can clearly be expected to do without.

We can also acknowledge the differences arising from the personal choices that individuals make about how to live. Within some limits, the non-moral interests I come to care about and the number and nature of the relationships I build my life around are a matter of personal choice. One person may choose to build their life around their passion for history while another finds meaning in fostering multiple connections and relationships with friends and people in their communities. To the extent that both of them see these commitments as integral to their sense of self they will be entitled to think of them as having priority in their moral lives. Likewise, what my family asks of me will not be the same as what someone else's family needs. There are, however, limits here. Not everything that those of us fortunate enough to live in the developed world have come to take for granted can reasonably be said to be essential to our moral agency and we will need to be careful here to avoid misrepresenting luxuries as essentials. Likewise,

while it is reasonable to say that personal relationships and core commitments play a central role in the integrity of our moral agency and that we are therefore entitled to act in ways necessary to support and sustain these relationships, relationships and interests like these can also cause us to neglect obligations to others and can become distorted and exaggerated in obsession and other destructive pathologies. Moreover, some relationships and interests that people choose to build their lives around are simply incompatible with respect for the conditions of their own and others' moral health and will have no legitimate claim to priority here. We cannot therefore just take the interests we find ourselves having grown into for granted and view them as privileged *merely* because we find ourselves attached to them. We must be willing, instead, to use our judgement to reflect critically on the particular nature of the relationships and interests we invest ourselves in and to revise these if we have reason to think they are problematic.

Notice also that clear lines here will routinely elude us and that agents will have reason to focus on overall priorities and strategies rather than individual choices in deciding how to organize their lives along these lines. After a stressful year I may reasonably be able to claim that I need a vacation in order to recuperate and reconnect with the important people in my life. There is an obvious difference, however, between a family trip to Hawaii for a week or two and a six month round-the-world tour of famous Michelin star restaurants. Sincere agents committed to respect for the conditions of moral health in a world of significant need ought to have serious difficultly representing the latter as something *essential* to their continued psychological health and, to the extent that they can do so in good faith, ought to consider weaning themselves off such unreasonably expensive tastes over time. Short of extremes like this, however, there is no formula here that we can use in order to determine whether any particular vacation is warranted and an obsessive preoccupation with this question encouraging constant reevaluation and

assessment of the choice of one's vacation would only undermine the value of taking it. Similar issues will arise when it comes to thinking about the relative priorities of different concerns and the proper limits of postponing our own needs. On the one hand, confronted with someone in grave need of food or shelter, it will always seem reasonable to suggest that I can postpone my vacation or delay buying my son the present he is anxiously anticipating in order to meet this more urgent need, on the other, continued postponement will eventually come at the cost one's own core commitments.

Mature moral agents will understand the importance of this indeterminacy. They will recognize the need to use judgement in deciding how to reconcile conflicting priorities and when they can put their own needs first but will also understand that if they confine themselves to confronting this choice each time in isolation they will risk underestimating the costs to themselves. Appreciating this, they will see themselves as having reason to take a longer view. So, for example, if I know that there is a large amount of unmet basic need likely to persist into the future, the appropriate response on my part will not be to keep trying to meet individual needs as I encounter them continually postponing my own. Instead, I will see myself as having reason to think more strategically and to try to find alternatives that strike a better balance, perhaps by committing myself to giving more modestly in the short term without harmfully postponing my own needs while also working seriously for longer term social and political change aimed at addressing these concerns on a broader scale.[13]

[13] A focus on political and institutional change will also be suggested by familiar practical considerations relating to the nature and scope of the problems to be addressed.

III

The kind of weighing of interests I propose is not, therefore, a matter of constant self-evaluation in the moment of choice. Nor does it commit us to the aggregation and maximization of goods or to the crude application of a general formula indifferent to variations in circumstances. The Kantian agent is, however, still relevantly committed to weighing moral interests associated with their pursuit of their own happiness and using their judgement to balance these interests against broader moral commitments in deciding how to live. Sincere Kantians will be expected to devote time to critical reflection on their various relationships and commitments and the interests of own-happiness they make room for in their lives and must be able to see these relationships and interests as compatible overall with their broader moral commitment to respect for the general conditions of moral health and moral prosperity in human beings. To this end, they will be expected to consider the nature and costs of their defining commitments and their relative urgency, and, more generally, to be willing to critically evaluate these commitments and to try to distinguish those that serve merely to enrich their lives from those that they sincerely regard as defining of their sense of self and essential to their continuing engagement with their lives. In doing so, the Kantian will have to use her judgement in ongoing critical reflection on the nature of her own and others' needs and interests. Barring unusual circumstances, she will not be required to be able to defend the immediate priority of individual choices she makes but she will be expected to think carefully about the role particular relationships or interests play in her life and the overall costs of maintaining these. Reasoning in this way, she may find herself forced to concede that a relationship she is involved with is problematic or that some interest she has always thought of as important is, on reflection, one she can postpone or do without. Alternatively, she may find herself having to conclude that she

should try to reduce her dependence on some inappropriate or very expensive core commitment over time.

There is no doubt that this model will be more demanding than Herman seems willing to endorse or than we presently seem comfortable with giving. I can justify the priority I attach to special relationships and core interests in my life here only if the choices I make and the priorities I structure my life around reflect a *similar and equal* commitment to the necessary conditions of others' moral health. In the world we live in, this will impose very significant demands on the time and energies of those of us fortunate enough to live even reasonably well in the developed nations. There is therefore no reason to expect any sense of comfort or closure from this account. In our world of widespread and persistent need, sincere individuals trying to help in isolation face a daunting and seemingly relentless task and will have to think carefully about how to help in these circumstances if they are to avoid simply sinking into debilitating despair. They should recognize that they ought not to have to bear this burden alone and that they have moral and practical reasons to prioritize efforts at ensuring collective action and must be mindful of the importance of leaving room for some enjoyment of their lives.

For most of us, however, the discomfort occasioned by reflection on our obligations to help others will have a different, and far less ennobling, source. Most of us engage in this kind of critical self-reflection only uncomfortably and haphazardly and we are adept at finding ways to shy away from the conclusions it suggests. Kant thinks of us as being powerfully moved by our desires and given to complacency and self-deception in critical self-examination and this is, I think, a failing too often on display in this context. We find it easy to rationalize the pursuit of our own interests and relationships and are good at finding excuses allowing us to pass up or postpone opportunities to help others. To different degrees, this tendency is, I think, common

even in otherwise reasonably conscientious moral agents and is manifested in a lingering sense of discomfort or guilt whenever we are more vividly confronted with the plight of others. That we have difficulty living up to it, does not, however, make an account too demanding and there is a very great deal more that most of us could easily do without approaching the point of significant sacrifice. The demands imposed here are not unlimited and the limits suggested, are I think, in line with the basic character of Kantian ethics and the universal and overriding commitments it imposes.

Though not a matter of weighing in the sense of a definitive algorithmic calculation of priorities, I take it that *some* form of comparative weighing like this is essential if we are to adequately meet the critic's challenge. I think Herman is right to stress the moral importance of own-happiness and the connection between core relationships and interests and our capacity for moral agency. I also think she is right to reject the schizophrenia that treats agents' moral interests as distinct from their personal interests and, instead, to moralize happiness on the one hand and humanize moral commitment on the other. The critic's concern here is, however, ultimately not one with the *form* of moral commitment, it is a concern with the *practical extent* of different commitments and the questions raised cannot be adequately addressed merely by structural changes in the way moral obligation and moral life are understood. I think that the account I propose offers us the resources we need to engage the questions that arise here and an attractive model of the kind of reasoning involved.

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