

Self-Love and Self-Conceit*

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Introduction

Kant holds a rather unflattering view of human nature in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. All of us, he believes, are prone to ‘self-love’ (*Eigenliebe*), a tendency to satisfy our needs and inclinations, and to ‘self-conceit’ (*Eigendünkel*), a tendency to treat our happiness as a source of law (KpV 5:73.9-14). Surprisingly, however, Kant says little to explain why we are prone to self-conceit, and his few scattered remarks on the issue are quite puzzling. In one place he says that ‘if self-love makes itself lawgiving and the unconditional practical principle, it can be called self-conceit’ (KpV 5:74.18-19). Yet this is far from clear. Given the natural and innocent tendency we have to self-love, what would lead us to treat our happiness as a lawgiving principle? What, in short, would lead us to self-conceit in the first place?

My discussion in this paper divides into six sections. In sections 1-2, I consider two possible ways of explaining the origin of self-conceit. One is to consider self-conceit in terms of how we compare ourselves with others; the other is to consider it in terms of how our sensible inclinations move us to act. Finding neither view satisfying, I then proceed to motivate an alternative account in sections 3-4. I argue that we find an illuminating parallel in Kant’s account of ‘transcendental illusion’ in the first *Critique*: the illusion we face in our search for systematic unity of knowledge. I argue that self-conceit has a similar structure, arising from the illusion that our happiness is an overriding (and hence supremely normative) end. Finally, in sections 5-6, I consider how self-conceit

* *Note to the reader*: I wrote the first draft of this paper in 2012 and it was later awarded the Wilfrid Sellars Essay Prize (offered by the North American Kant Society) in 2013. I do not intend to submit it for publication. But since it continues to get cited in the literature, I want to make it publicly available here.

might acquire a social dimension, leading us at one extreme to reject the equal dignity of others.

1 Our Social Nature

If there is anything like a consensus in the secondary literature, it is that self-conceit is a product of social antagonism. We treat the satisfaction of our needs and inclinations as a source of law, on this view, because we seek to acquire power and preeminent status over others. On the social view, then, self-conceit is another word for what Rousseau calls *amour-propre*. Here are two samples of this reading:

Rousseau considers humanity to be good in the 'natural' (i.e., pre-social) state, because he considers all human wickedness and misery to be the consequence of the social condition, and the trait of *amour-propre*, which human beings begin to display as soon as they enter it. This is, of course, the same thing as 'self-conceit,' or 'ambition' — the sense of comparative self-worth and the desire to achieve superior worth in the eyes of others. (Wood 1999: 291)

Self-conceit attempts to get others to defer to your interests by claiming a special value for your person and by ranking yourself higher. In this way, it seeks a kind of respect that moves in one direction. When you treat a person with respect, you attribute a value to his or her person which limits how you may act. Self-conceit would have others act as though your interests outweigh theirs, and refuses to return the respect that it demands. This indicates that it is at root a desire to dominate others. (Reath 2006: 19)

While this reading is accepted by most commentators today, the claim that self-conceit arises from comparative judgments faces at least three problems. On their own, these problems are not decisive for refuting the social view, but together they serve to cast doubt on what many assume to be the correct interpretation of Kant's moral psychology.

The first problem is conceptual in nature. If we say I desire to acquire superiority over others because I presume a special value for myself, we still have to account for my initial presumption. On what grounds, we must ask, do I take myself to have a value that others (in my eyes) do not have? To say it comes from my desire to dominate would be circular. We cannot explain why I presume a greater value for myself by referencing my desire to dominate, since by virtue of having that desire I must already think of myself as better than others.

On the other hand, it would be empty to say I assume a greater value for myself because doing so may increase my welfare. A concern to increase my welfare is basic to the attitude I have in self-love, and self-love is an innocent tendency on its own. Why then would the concern I have to increase my welfare go awry, to the point where I seek to acquire superiority over others?¹ The social view must explain how relations with others bring about the transformation of self-love into self-conceit. But it would be circular to locate this explanation in our desire to dominate, and empty to locate it in our desire for welfare.

Setting such problems aside, the social explanation also runs afoul on textual grounds. According to Reath's interpretation, self-conceit is a form of vanity, a 'desire to be highly regarded' or a 'comparative form of value that one only achieves at the expense of others — for example, by surpassing them, or by being perceived to surpass them in certain qualities' (2006: 19). Yet as other commentators have pointed out, this attitude may only be a consequence of entering into relations with others, not its primary cause.² I think the same point holds for Kant's discussion of 'radical evil' in his later work. A few passages in the *Religion* appear to blame social antagonism for the corruption of self-love, as when Kant writes that 'envy, addiction to power, avarice, and the malignant inclinations associated with these' assail a person 'as soon as he is among human beings' (RGV 6:93-94). Yet on further examination, this passage does not say whether entering into relations with others is the source of evil or simply an occasion for it to manifest. In either case the textual evidence is open to interpretation: a desire for power and preeminent status may be how self-conceit arises in social relations, without those relations serving as its primary cause. Kant may only have the former in mind, for example, when he analyzes the social dimension of self-conceit in his *Lectures on Ethics* and the *Doctrine of Virtue* (cf., MPC 27:349, 359, 457, 621; IaG 8:21; MS 6:462, 465). I will have more to say about this social dimension later in the paper.

The last problem I want to address is more specific, but also more relevant to our discussion here. When Kant speaks of self-conceit in the second *Critique*, he does not mention the sort of comparative judgments that inflame *amour-propre*. Rather, he characterizes self-conceit as a form of self-esteem misdirected to our sensible nature. Early in Chapter III Kant says that our 'propensity to self-esteem, so long as it rests only on sensibility [*blos auf der Sinnlichkeit*],

¹ Makkreel (2012: 108) makes a similar point in criticizing Wood's view.

² See Allison (1990: 267, note 46) and Grimm (2002: 166-167) for illuminating discussions.

belongs with the inclinations which the moral law infringes upon' (KpV 5:73).³ As I understand it, Kant's point is that by giving priority to the satisfaction of our needs and inclinations, we inflate the value of our happiness, the idea of our overall welfare. That is why our self-conceit must be lowered ('humiliated' or 'struck down') the moment we recognize the moral law's authority. Any claims to self-esteem that 'precede agreement with the moral law are null and quite unwarranted' (KpV 5:73).⁴ After all, a disposition in accord with the moral law 'is the first condition of any worth of a person... and any presumption prior to this is false and opposed to the law' (KpV 5:73). Kant concludes, to quote the rest of the passage, that 'the propensity to self-esteem, so long as it rests only on sensibility, belongs with the inclinations which the moral law infringes upon.' Thus the 'moral law strikes down self-conceit' (KpV 5:73).

To sum up, we risk circularity if we try to explain the corruption of self-love in terms of our desire to dominate. Such a desire assumes that we possess greater worth than others, and so without further premises it cannot explain why our sense of worth becomes excessive. Relatedly, we risk emptiness if we try to explain the corruption of self-love in terms of our desire for welfare. Such a desire is innocent on its own, and so without further premises it cannot explain why we seek superiority of rank and status in the first place. Moreover, textual evidence for the social view is not as strong as it first appears. As we have seen, the few passages where Kant appears to blame social antagonism for the corruption of self-love turn out to be ambiguous: they leave open the question of whether relations with others are the primary cause of self-conceit or merely the occasion for its expression. Lastly, there is no text in the second *Critique* itself where Kant describes self-conceit in terms of competitive social evaluations. On the contrary, when Kant speaks of self-conceit in Chapter III (at KpV 5:73), he connects it explicitly with the 'inclinations' our recognition of the moral law infringes upon.

³ It is worth emphasizing that Kant does not think self-conceit is a particular trait of character only some individuals have (say, those we consider extremely arrogant). It is, he thinks, an assumption of self-worth all rational human beings possess. This follows from Kant's remark that the moral law 'unavoidably humiliates *every human being* when he compares with it the sensible propensity of his nature' (KpV 5:74; my emphasis).

⁴ Versions of this claim appear in Kant's more popular work, where he identifies the source of evil in the way reason develops for sensible beings like ourselves. As he writes, 'when reason began its business and, weak as it is, got into a scuffle with animality in its whole strength, then there had to arise ills and, what is worse, with more cultivated reason, vices' (MAM 8:116-117).

2 Our Sensible Nature

In light of the problems facing the social view, it may be tempting to draw the following conclusion: that if self-conceit does not originate in our *social* nature, it must originate in our *sensible* nature. However, it is important to see why this is not a viable interpretive route for us to take either. First, Kant considers our needs and inclinations morally blameless (unlike the Stoics who took them to be causes of vicious behavior) (RGV 6:35). Second, and more significantly, Kant does not think our needs and inclinations can directly determine our faculty of choice. Rather, he thinks an agent must to some extent participate in the process of deliberation leading up to action, what Henry Allison (1990) calls the ‘Incorporation Thesis.’ Instead of being overcome by sensible incentives, by their motivational pull, an agent must be able to consider them as reasons for acting; he must be able to ‘incorporate’ their pull into his maxims. As Kant puts it, ‘an incentive can determine the will to action *only insofar as the individual has incorporated it into his maxim* (has made it into a general rule in accordance with which he will conduct himself)’ (RGV 6:24). On Allison’s gloss, this means: ‘an inclination or desire does not of itself constitute a reason for acting. It can become one only with reference to a rule or principle of action’ (1990: 40).

This shows why we would be mistaken to locate the origin of self-conceit in our sensible nature. Yet it also makes the question of self-conceit’s origin that much more mysterious. To treat my happiness as an overriding (and hence supremely normative) end is to give priority to satisfying my inclinations. This is not a one-time choice, nor is it isolated to any specific occasion of desire. When I am tempted by a sensible incentive, whatever it may be, I still have to incorporate the incentive into my maxim in order to act. It does not cause me to act, as if by brute force. But the act of ‘incorporation’ we are considering in self-conceit must concern all of my inclinations. We are considering a life-governing policy⁵ that would have me treat their satisfaction as the highest aim of deliberation (to make self-love the ‘unconditional practical principle,’ as Kant says). The point I want to stress, however, is that given the Incorporation Thesis, we cannot say agents treat their happiness as an overriding end because their inclinations have an overpowering *effect* on them. Agents in self-conceit must actively endorse their happiness, and to do so they must have a *reason*. The

⁵ Or we could speak of a ‘self-governing policy’ in Bratman’s sense (2000: 48).

question, then, is what reason that could be.⁶ What could lead us to think we are justified in treating our happiness as a source of law?

3 Transcendental Illusion

To prepare the way for my answer, I would like to step outside the second *Critique* briefly and consider what Kant has to say about the concept of transcendental illusion in the first *Critique*. In the section of the book titled the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’ Kant explains that rational inquiry depends on principles which, if not carefully checked, will ‘incite us to tear down all those boundary posts’ that condition our knowledge of objects (A296/B352). The difficulty is that we cannot readily distinguish between what is necessary for our cognition of things and what is necessary for things in themselves. That is why we are prone to mistake the former for the latter, owing to what Kant calls transcendental illusion. When philosophy falls under this spell, it yields the three disciplines of traditional metaphysics — rational theology, rational cosmology, and rational psychology — along with their objects — God, the World, and the Soul.

Kant thinks the philosopher doing metaphysics is exposed to transcendental illusion because of his failure to distinguish appearances from things in themselves, a failure that leads him to claim knowledge of ‘objects’ beyond the restricting conditions of human sensibility. This is symptomatic of our (pre-critical) tendency to confuse a legitimate maxim of reason’s use for a principle capable of yielding knowledge of objects in themselves. Kant’s own summary of the problem is revealing:

In our reason (considered subjectively as a human faculty of cognition) there lie fundamental rules and maxims for its use, *which look entirely like objective principles*, and through them it comes about that the subjective necessity of a certain connection of our concepts on behalf of the understanding is taken for an objective necessity, the determination of things in themselves. (A297/B535; my emphasis)

⁶ My way of framing this task is indebted to Morgan’s (2005) discussion of radical evil. As he puts it, if we can identify a reason that would (in the eyes of the deliberating agent) justify subordinating the moral law to self-love, then we can ‘elucidate’ the source of evil. This would amount to providing an ‘account of the psychology of the evil person in order to show what kinds of considerations attract her to wrongdoing, and what it is about human beings that make it the case that we can be attracted to it in this way’ (2005: 89). I shall aim to bring this perspective to the topic of self-conceit.

Due to our striving for knowledge, we find ourselves adopting a maxim to raise the question ‘why?’ until we have found an ultimate explanation — in Kant’s terms, until we have found the ‘unconditioned condition.’ And yet, owing to transcendental illusion, we are prone to confuse this maxim for a principle that would somehow yield knowledge of the unconditioned itself. Even when we refrain from thinking the appearance is true, we cannot shake off the illusion it presents to us. Transcendental illusion is not something we can avoid, ‘just as little as the astronomer can prevent the rising moon from appearing larger to him, even when he is not deceived by this illusion’ (A297/B353-54).

We can then take Kant to be saying that we are prone to confuse an imperative for our search of knowledge for a putative description of something’s noumenal existence. In general terms the rules and maxims Kant mentions in the passage from A297/B535 refer to reason’s logical use. Together, these rules and maxims say:

Prescription (‘P’). Strive for complete and systematic unity of understanding, and only stop when you have found the ultimate explanation of things.⁷

Yet Kant’s point is that in our pre-critical state, we are prone to confuse *P* with a principle of reason’s real use, i.e., one that presents us with a description of noumenal reality. Underlying this principle is an assumption that nature already conforms to reason’s demand. This gives us:

Description (‘D’). The ultimate explanation is given, a complete and systematic unity out there to be discovered.⁸

While Kant says little to explain why we are liable to slide from *P* to *D*, this much is clear.⁹ *P* expresses a subjective maxim for how we should employ our cognitive faculties in our search for knowledge. Given the rational authority of *P*, then, it is sensible for us to think reason enjoins us to seek something really there, something waiting for us to be discovered. What is more, this illusion will

⁷ ‘Find the unconditioned for the conditioned cognitions of the understanding, with which its unity will be completed’ (A307/B364).

⁸ ‘When the conditioned is given, then so is the whole series of conditions subordinated one to the other, which is itself also given (i.e., contained in the object and its connection’ (A307/B364).

⁹ I am borrowing the terminology of ‘*P*’ and ‘*D*’ from Ian Proops (2010). I have benefited from his discussion of transcendental illusion, along with the interpretations offered by Grier (2001) and Allison (2004) respectively.

deceive us so long as we fail to distinguish appearances from reality. Without this distinction, nothing will prevent us from committing ‘metaphysical error,’ that is, the error of thinking we can know things in themselves. In one respect, however, the error is inescapable, and this is the point I want to make. Since our failure to distinguish appearances from reality marks an unavoidable stage in reason’s development, it is only natural that we succumb to transcendental illusion.¹⁰ Thus, prior to reflection and criticism — the therapeutic measures of Kant’s first *Critique* — we have no position to see *D* for what it is. We have no protection from its deceptive power.

4 Practical Illusion

Returning to the second *Critique*, I would like to begin by considering the following passage:

A human being is a being with needs, insofar as he belongs to the sensible world, and to this extent his reason certainly has a commission [*Auftrag*] from the side of his sensibility which it cannot refuse, to attend to its interest and to form practical maxims with a view to happiness in this life and, where possible, in a future life as well. (KpV 5:61.24-29)

This is helpful for understanding what Kant thinks we do after we step back from our needs and inclinations. We imagine the condition of our own ‘happiness’ (*Glückseligkeit*), the idea of the sum-total satisfaction of our needs and inclinations. Kant makes this point earlier in the second *Critique* when he writes that happiness is a ‘problem’ imposed upon the human being ‘by his finite nature itself; for he is ‘needy and this need is directed to the matter of his faculty of desire’ (KpV 5:25). We cannot ignore the demands of our sensible nature, in other words, and that is the sense in which we must form an idea of our overall welfare. Yet as the above passage makes clear, we are not determined by our needs and inclinations on their own. In responding to the demands of our sensible nature, we must form maxims with a view to our happiness, and that is something only rational beings can do.¹¹

¹⁰ In the first *Critique* Kant writes that ‘the first step in matters of pure reason, which characterizes its childhood, is dogmatic’ (A761/B789). He also characterizes our propensity to make knowledge-claims prior to critique in terms of ‘self-conceit’ (cf., A476/B504, A629/B657, A735/B763, A743/B771, A757/B785, A781/B801).

¹¹ As Herman explains, in taking up the task of happiness we begin a process of individuation. ‘Given the variety of needs, desires, and interests that we have, work needs to be done with

My further suggestion is that once we form an idea of our happiness, we are subject to a new imperative of practical reason. In figuring out how to fulfill our inclinations as a whole — by developing some, deferring others, and so forth — we must judge the rationality of our ends, asking ourselves (at least implicitly) how we can achieve the greatest possible satisfaction. Although Kant never formulates this imperative, we can think of its general version as a prescription to prefer the whole of our satisfaction to any of its limited parts. Call this:

Maxim of Prudence. Make happiness your end, always preferring it to any limited satisfaction or temporary pleasure.¹²

Now it is important to see that this maxim is a legitimate policy of choice. We need only make sure to exercise it properly, always deferring to the moral law in cases where pursuing our happiness conflicts with the requirements of duty.¹³ Nevertheless, my point is that this maxim inevitably misappears to an agent whose rational capacities are still developing, i.e., to an agent *who is not yet conscious of any alternative normative principle*. Since it enjoins us to assign more weight to our pursuit of happiness, this maxim appears to exert the force of law, as if it were saying:

Law of Prudence. Make happiness your highest end, always preferring it to any other consideration for action.

As we can see, this slide parallels the structure of transcendental illusion discussed above.¹⁴ Like anyone who mistakes a maxim to seek ultimate explana-

and among them—develop some, defer others, sublimate, repress—the whole battery of techniques, conscious and unconscious, by which we come to be the specific individuals we are’ (2005: 26).

¹² I am borrowing this formulation, with slight modification, from Wood (1999: 67). As Wood argues, when we employ the idea of our total satisfaction, ‘we must judge not only the rationality of actions, relative to a given end, but also the rationality of ends relative to a whole of satisfaction, depending on whether they can be included within this whole’ (1999: 67).

¹³ For Kant, the agent who limits his pursuit of happiness to the moral law displays ‘rational self-love’ (KpV 5:74).

¹⁴ One might wonder how far the analogy to transcendental illusion extends. Transcendental illusion arises when we mistake an imperative to seek the unconditioned for a claim of the unconditioned’s objective reality. Practical illusion arises when we mistake an imperative to pursue the total satisfaction of our desires for a lawgiving principle. However, this difference poses no problem for the analogy I want to draw. Practical illusion concerns the status of a maxim for guiding the will (and the illusion is that this maxim is lawgiving). Transcendental illusion concerns the status of a maxim for guiding cognition (and the illusion is that this maxim speaks to something’s existence). The difference between these illusions, then, reflects the difference between speculative and practical uses of reason.

tions ('P') for a principle to know things in themselves ('D'), the agent in self-love mistakes the Maxim of Prudence for a principle to make her own happiness lawgiving. Saying this is consistent with Kant's Incorporation Thesis, for the slide I have just identified locates self-conceit in the agent's free choice rather than in the inclinations' motivational pull. The Law of Prudence appears to justify making self-love a life-governing policy, in the same way that the illusion of *D* appears to justify asserting knowledge of things in themselves. In each case, we are responsible for acting upon the illusion. We are responsible, not for the illusion itself, but for the error of acting on it.

On this reconstruction, then, self-conceit emerges from the way practical reason develops within us as sensible beings. Before an agent is aware of the moral law, all she has to attend to are her needs and inclinations. These present themselves to her as demands, and so seem to be objective. Once she forms an idea of their total satisfaction, she will not only think her happiness should have preference to any temporary pleasure of the moment. She will also think her happiness should have preference to any other consideration for acting. This illusion is both natural and unavoidable (although correctible, of course). Moreover, an agent will be exposed to this illusion, not only because the Law of Prudence is structurally similar to the Maxim of Prudence — they both appear as rational imperatives — but because there is for her no alternative to the Law of Prudence that could question its authority. *If* she were aware of the moral law, she would have another principle to consider, and then she would be in a position to ask herself whether she ought to give happiness priority in all matters of deliberation. But my point is that we are considering an agent who is unaware of this principle at this stage of her development.

5 Enthusiasm

By tracing the origin of self-conceit to the way practical reason develops within us, I have sought an alternative to the view that self-conceit arises from comparative relations with others. One problem with the social view, aside from the textual difficulties discussed earlier, is that it fails to provide a satisfying account of how we come to overvalue our happiness. That being said, even if the alternative I have defended in this paper is plausible, the question of why we are prone to seek power and preeminent status remains unanswered. By way of concluding my discussion here, I will propose that we can understand the social dimension of self-conceit by turning to a rarely discussed part of the sec-

ond *Critique*: the part of Chapter III devoted to what Kant calls ‘enthusiasm’ (*Schwärmerei*).

After a digression on the Biblical commandments of love, Kant explains that his interest is not so much to curb religious enthusiasm as it is to clarify ‘the moral disposition directly, in regard to our duties toward human beings as well, and to check, or where possible prevent, a merely moral enthusiasm which infects many people’ (KpV 5:84). To this end Kant says we must realize that complete perfection of will is beyond our reach. The possibility of violating the moral law will always be alive for us; and that is why we must view the moral law as a system of imperatives, as what we ‘ought’ to do. It would be foolish of us to think we could relate to it differently (KpV 5:84). Indeed, it would be nothing more than a fantasy of transcending human nature itself, ‘as if we could ever bring it about that without respect for the law, which is connected with fear or at least apprehension of transgressing it, we of ourselves, like the Deity raised beyond all dependence, could come into possession of holiness of will’ (KpV 5:82).

This last remark indicates why enthusiasm differs from self-conceit, at least in its first manifestation. As we have seen, self-conceit arises because we are liable to distort the Maxim of Prudence as an unconditional *command*, thereby misrepresenting what is really a subjective policy of choice. Now if we take ourselves to possess a holy will — ‘like the Deity raised beyond all dependence’ — we will be liable to distort the moral law as a form of *counsel*, thereby misrepresenting what is really a categorical law. Moreover, if we think that what the moral law requires of us is optional, it will appear supererogatory for us to act on it. We could then convince ourselves that whenever we act on moral grounds, we are doing something extraordinary, something above and beyond the call of duty. Of course, that is not ‘befitting our position among rational beings as human beings,’ all the more so, Kant adds, if we presume ‘with proud conceit, like volunteers, not to trouble ourselves about the thought of duty and, as independent of command, to want to do of our own pleasure what we think we need no command to do’ (KpV 5:82).

This explains why a tendency to enthusiasm might inflate our sense of self-worth further. By pursuing moral courses of action, we will restrain our lower impulses, setting aside our immediate wants and wishes for other, supposedly altruistic or heroic ends. As a result, we will come to have a vague sense of our rational capacities: by denying our animal nature, we will acquire a sense of our freedom. We will esteem ourselves, then, but it will amount to yet another

illusion: the illusion that our rational qualities set us apart from everyone else. Support for this interpretation comes from what Kant has to say about moral education later in the second *Critique*. In learning to distinguish the motives of other people, Kant says we must feel a kind of satisfaction in extending our cognitive powers. At this stage of our development, he explains, morality will acquire the form of beauty. Our contemplation of it will be pleasing, but the object of our satisfaction will remain indifferent to us, ‘inasmuch as the object is viewed only as the occasion of our becoming aware of the tendency of talents in us which are elevated above animality’ (KpV 5:160). My suggestion here, building from this remark, is that seeing ourselves elevated above animality may lead us to think we possess unique moral value.

This is, I think, the key to understanding how self-conceit might acquire a social dimension. From what we have discussed, it is clear that our self-image in enthusiasm will be highly unstable. As long as we live among others, we will be faced with demands for respect, fairness, equality — in short, all the rules of impartial morality. So it is not difficult to see why we will come to display *amour-propre* in our social interactions. As soon as we claim unique moral value for ourselves, we will be forced to support our title by making belittling judgments of others, striving in all cases to be better than them, especially with regard to our imagined moral perfections. Presumably there is a spectrum here from bad to worse. At one end, we will do nothing beyond fantasize about our own greatness, as well as wish that others always think highly of us. At the other end, we will actually seek to acquire superiority over others — either by amassing external credentials or, more viciously, by entering into positions of power that enable physical abuse or emotional manipulation.¹⁵

Once we see why enthusiasm might lead to *amour-propre*, we can also see why it might lead to radical evil proper (a connection I will only sketch here). By making an unwarranted claim to self-worth, we will assume membership in an eminent domain — ‘above’ the rules that hold for everyone else. However flighty this sounds, it is not a trivial error; for in aspiring to holiness enthusiasts end up overstepping the bounds that ‘practical pure reason sets to humanity’ (KpV 5:86). This is why Kant considers it a serious threat: enthusiasts end up

¹⁵ Here it seems fair to say that enthusiasm will produce what Adrian Piper (1987) has termed ‘generalized pathological narcissism,’ whereby narcissists find themselves dependent on the opinion of others to support their unstable self-esteem. For these reasons, she explains, narcissists ‘are beset by occasional eruptions of self-righteously sadistic anger and nightmares of self-contempt, both of which are recycled to fuel the grandiose belief that their ideals and aspirations are higher and purer than anyone else’s’ (1987: 108).

rejecting the equal dignity of all persons. So it is not a stretch to say that, if we take ourselves to belong to an eminent domain, we will likely make exceptions for ourselves to rules we think others should obey (violating the formula of universal law), as well as treat others as mere means for attaining our personal ends (violating the formula of humanity). As Kant says, ‘to fail to recognize our inferior position as creatures and to deny from self-conceit the authority of the holy law is already to defect from it in spirit, even though the letter of the law is fulfilled’ (KpV 5:82-83). Here the danger of enthusiasm lies, not in devilish rebellion, but in a kind of sanctified self-affirmation.

How does enthusiasm reach this extreme? As I have characterized it so far, enthusiasm starts off initially as a tendency to misrepresent the moral law, to view it as a mere counsel. While Kant voices the worry of enthusiasm as a positive error — that of overstepping the bounds of humanity — he does not say how this comes about. To fill in these details, let us suppose now that someone in the grips of enthusiasm becomes aware of the moral law in its true form. Right away we can see that he must experience a psychological shock (the feeling of humiliation Kant describes earlier in Chapter III). The reason for this is clear. In its true form the moral law does not cater to anyone’s privileged self-image, not even to the slightest degree. That is why it must level a blow to the enthusiast. Yet the important point is this: there is no reason to think the enthusiast will react with humility in return; for he is already invested deeply in himself. Rather than acknowledge his self-image for what it is, a delusion, the enthusiast is more likely prone to strike back. And that is where radical evil might arise.

Interestingly, Kant comes close to articulating this point in the *Groundwork*. But instead of the name radical evil, he gives it a less menacing title, *rationalization*. The law, Kant writes, ‘issues its precepts unremittingly, without thereby promising anything to the inclinations, and so, as it were, with disregard and contempt for those claims’ (G 4:405). Our natural reaction, he remarks, is to find a counter-measure, ‘to cast doubt upon their validity, or at least upon their purity and strictness,’ even, he adds, ‘to make them better suited to our wishes and inclinations’ (G 4:405). In doing so we strive to undermine the authority of all duties, ‘to corrupt them at their basis and to destroy all their dignity’ (G 4:405). As one commentator puts it, the recognition the moral law inflicts upon the ego ‘may prompt it to strike back in anger,’ and it may do this by staging a reversal of representation, throwing back the discovery of its own pretense (Engstrom 2010: 115). Out of wounded pride, the enthusiast may ridicule all

morality as nothing but sheer fantasy, an illusion of the imagination ‘overstepping itself in self-conceit’ (G 4:407).

While Kant’s remarks from the *Groundwork* indicate that what we strive to dignify are merely lower impulses in place of morality, we can generalize his claim to include the enthusiast’s more lofty wishes too. And once his remarks are generalized in this way, we can see — if only in outline — why enthusiasm might acquire a darker guise. From what Kant says, it is clear that our process of rationalization only begins when we grasp morality in its true form. When we have made a prior claim to self-worth, our awareness of morality will provoke a shock, but only if we recognize it for what it is, a categorical demand. Then, perhaps, is it clear why we might *willfully* place ourselves above the law, formulating in our minds a policy to obey its rules only if it suits us. As Kant says, this is really our counter-measure, our way of striking back to the very object that challenges our pretensions to uniqueness. After all, in the grips of enthusiasm we have formed something of singular importance — the grandiose belief that we are, in our ideals and aspirations, better than everyone else. Such arrogance is, of course, a fragile delusion. Radical evil, our way of refusing the dignity of all other persons, may simply be our tragic attempt to defend it.

Abbreviations

In the case of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I follow the standard practice of referring to the 1781 (A) and 1787 (B) editions. For all other texts, citations appear in the order of abbreviation, volume number, page number, and (where relevant) line number from the *Akademie Ausgabe, Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by *Königlich Preussische akademie der Wissenschaften* (29 vols. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1900 —). All translations come from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992 —). Where I depart from them, I add ‘modified’ after the in-text citation.

Anth	<i>Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht</i> (7), <i>Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View</i> , trans. R. Louden.
G	<i>Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten</i> (4), <i>Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals</i> , trans. M. Gregor.
IaG	<i>Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichtein weltbürgerlicher Absicht</i> (8), <i>Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View</i> , trans. A. Wood.
KpV	<i>Kritik der praktischen Vernunft</i> (5), <i>Critique of Practical Reason</i> , trans. M. Gregor.
MAM	<i>Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Menschheitsgeschichte</i> (8), <i>Conjectural Beginning of Human History</i> , trans. A. Wood.
MPC	<i>Moralphilosophie Collins</i> (27), <i>Moral Philosophy Collins</i> , trans. P. Heath.
MS	<i>Die Metaphysik der Sitten</i> (6), <i>Metaphysics of Morals</i> , trans. M. Gregor.
RGV	<i>Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft</i> (6), <i>Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason</i> , trans. G. Di Giovanni.

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