

# COMMUNITY & PROGRESS IN KANT'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY



KATE A. MORAN

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*Kate A. Moran*



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*For my parents,  
Bruce and Barbara Moran*





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## INTRODUCTION



THIS BOOK is a defense of the crucial role of community in Kant's moral philosophy. Over the course of the chapters that follow, I argue that Kant's moral theory reserves a central role for community in two distinct and ultimately related ways. First, Kant's moral philosophy—though often described as unconcerned with ends and goals—actually urges us to strive toward a particular end, and this end is best understood as a kind of ethical community. Second, the means through which we can best achieve this end are also social. Participation in social institutions and relationships such as education, friendship, and civic life help us to develop our moral capacities and thus further our progress toward the ideal ethical community. Indeed, because Kant tells us that we have a duty to work toward an ethical community, these social institutions that facilitate our progress toward this end become central to a complete account of Kant's moral philosophy.

This defense of the role of community in Kant's moral philosophy is important because his theory is often criticized for its alleged individualism. The major task of this introduction will be to explore these criticisms in order to understand the precise challenge that a Kantian defense of community must meet. In general, these charges of individualism in Kant's ethics tend to rest on two observations about his theory. In the first place, the *justification* for right action in Kant's ethics seems to be an individualistic one—there appears to be no shared good or communal end that agents appeal to when they consider the morality of their actions. Rather, Kant's moral philosophy puts the right before the good; the ground or justification for moral

action has to do with respecting humanity and autonomy, and not with striving toward a previously defined good or community. Second, Kantian agents seem to become aware of the moral law individually, and they seem also to be able to apply the law on their own. Kant tells us that our knowledge of the moral law is implicit in the thought and action of normally developed agents, and that these agents do not need to consult others or receive any special education in order to know what the moral law requires of them. And, while applying the moral law might require knowledge of empirical particulars, the principles of practical reason that allow us to act are similarly fundamental and not shaped by community.

This book addresses each of these claims and argues that, although these observations about Kant's moral philosophy are not, strictly speaking, inaccurate, they fail to provide a complete picture of what is entailed by Kant's theory. In the first place (as noted above), Kant's moral philosophy is not wholly unconcerned with the ends that moral agents seek. It is, of course, true that Kant's theory does not begin with a claim about our obligation to promote happiness or some other end. Rather, it starts with a set of claims about our obligations to make our use of freedom consistent with others' use of freedom, and to respect humanity in others and ourselves. But precisely because Kant's theory values humanity, or our rational capacity to set and pursue ends, it will also be a theory that is concerned—on some level—that we are able to *accomplish* these ends. This combination of virtue and happiness (understood as the fulfillment of ends) constitutes what, for Kant, is the ultimate goal or end of his moral philosophy—a state of affairs that he calls the highest good. Kant's theory of the highest good is the focus of the first chapter of this book. In that chapter, I argue that Kant's most considered and developed account of the highest good describes this end as one that is realized in a community of moral agents in the course of human his-

tory. And since Kant tells us that we have a duty to pursue the highest good, this means that the end of morality that agents ought to seek, according to Kant, is actually a kind of community. I also argue (though this is a separate and stronger claim) that Kantian agents ought to think of the achievement of this community as part of the justification for moral action. When someone asks us why something is right or virtuous, the Kantian agent should be able to justify her action by appealing—in part—to the fact that it contributes to the achievement of this type of ethical community.

But I will also argue that this fact about the ends of Kant's ethics gives us reason to think that his moral philosophy is concerned with community in a second way. As noted above, Kant tells us that we have an *obligation* to pursue the end of the highest good. And because we have a duty to pursue the end of the ethical community, we also have a duty to pursue various activities that will help us accomplish this end more effectively. So, while it is true that Kantian agents should be able to know the moral law individually, it is also the case that a moral education, for example, can make agents more adept at moral reasoning and applying the moral law. Similarly, participation in a "moral friendship" can help us overcome obstacles to virtue, and participation in civic life can help us become more skilled at thinking from the standpoint of others. Thus, not only is the goal of Kant's moral philosophy a social one, but the means that we must pursue in order to achieve this goal are social, too. With these two facts in place, we can begin to see that Kant's moral philosophy asks us to be deeply involved with our community, to educate each other and make each other more virtuous so that we can achieve the end of community that morality dictates.

Before we begin this discussion, however, it is important to understand the precise criticisms of individualism leveled against Kant's moral philosophy. In the section that follows,



I outline two versions of this criticism and argue that it is the latter of these that Kantians concerned with community ought to be most concerned with.

*Kant's (Alleged) Individualism*

In order to motivate the discussion in the rest of the book, I include here a brief discussion of some common criticisms concerning Kant's alleged individualism. I take these communitarian criticisms in two groups. First, I consider the objection that Kantian (or liberal) agents are unattached—that is, that they can have no essential commitments to other agents or to their own projects. Certainly, the project of this book would be somewhat hindered if this were the case. Fortunately, I think, these criticisms are fairly easily dispensed with, and in the first section I demonstrate why this is the case.

Next, I consider what I take to be a more serious set of objections to Kant's theory. Proponents of this criticism argue that even if Kantian agents are not problematically detached from their own projects and from each other, they are nevertheless unattached from a larger historical narrative. This fact, so the argument goes, leads to a kind of emptiness and alienation in Kant's theory. This is a criticism that is unquestionably inspired by Hegel's criticism of Kant, and while that topic could fill (and has filled) many volumes, in this brief discussion I hope only to show how Hegel's criticisms are a predecessor to similar contemporary criticisms of Kant and liberalism, most notably those of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor.<sup>1</sup>

1. I should also note that the contemporary criticisms I consider in this introduction are not focused solely on Kant's conception of morality. Both Sandel and MacIntyre level their criticisms primarily against contemporary liberal theory (especially Rawls), but make references to Kant as well. This should not trouble us: while it is clear that Rawls is operating with different (certainly fewer) metaphysical assumptions than Kant is, I think that most of the criticisms leveled at him can be aimed at Kant as well. This is because these criticisms have

In many respects, the remainder of this book is a response to the worries raised by this group of objectors.

*Unattached to Other Agents and Commitments*

The criticism that the Kantian agent is incapable of commitment to projects, relationships, and institutions is raised most notably by Michael Sandel. Sandel's criticism finds its source in the observation that Kant bases his theory on the ideal of a free chooser of ends. He begins by citing what he takes to be the core thesis of liberalism (and, by extension, Kant's theory): that "a just society seeks not to promote any particular ends, but enables its citizens to pursue their own ends, consistent with a similar liberty for all; it therefore must govern by principles that do not presuppose any particular conception of the good."<sup>2</sup> For Kant, Sandel explains, what is right does not have to do with an external object, for example, of bringing about the greatest happiness. Instead, what is right is based on principles that stem solely from the fact that moral agents are capable of setting and pursuing their own ends. In several passages describing the flaws in Kantian theory, Sandel cites the following passage from Kant's "Theory and Practice" essay in order to demonstrate the apparent emptiness of Kant's moral theory:<sup>3</sup> "But the concept of an external right as such proceeds entirely from the concept of *freedom* in the external relation of people to one another and has nothing at all to do with the

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to do with those aspects of contemporary liberalism that have clear counterparts in Kant's practical philosophy. These features include, for example, the fundamental notion of a moral subject who is free to choose various associations and courses of actions. In Kant, this notion is expressed by the assertion that subjects are not bound by the laws of nature. In Rawls, it is expressed by the claim that moral agents are free to decide upon their own conception of the good. Still, when possible, I cite the references that these philosophers make to Kant.

2. Michael Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self," *Political Theory* 12, no. 1 (1984): 81–96, at 82.

3. See *ibid.*, and Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

end that all of them naturally have (their aim at happiness) and with the prescribing of means for attaining it.”<sup>4</sup>

Sandel continues by examining the consequences that such a theory about the relationship between the right and the good has for individual agents. His conclusion is that there will be a kind of parallel between the theory and its agents and that “as the right is prior to the good, so the subject [will be] prior to its ends.”<sup>5</sup> This means that agents in a Kantian society will be “unencumbered” selves, selves “understood as prior to and independent of purposes and ends.”<sup>6</sup> He elaborates that this means that “no role or commitment could define me so completely that I could not understand myself without it.”<sup>7</sup> Though the Kantian agent is free to set and pursue ends, and in some sense is even defined by her capacity to do so, it is still the case that there is never any particular conception of the good that she is *necessarily* tied to. This is typically thought of as one of the stronger selling points of liberal theory, but given Sandel’s communitarian commitments, it is problematic. The liberal agent becomes a kind of empty vessel that—by definition—cannot be filled with any essential project or relationship.

But Sandel’s conception of the Kantian end-setter makes several unwarranted assumptions. First, the notion of practical reason with which Sandel credits Kant is a rather skeletal one. On Sandel’s account, it seems that Kantian agents set ends almost on a whim, and then, just as quickly as they have set them, tend to abandon those ends and projects in favor of new ends. But nothing like this is entailed by Kant’s conception of practical reasoning. Rather, Kant’s conception of practical reasoning admits of all manner of long-term end setting, prefer-

4. Immanuel Kant, “On the Common Saying: That May be Correct in Theory but Is of no Use in Practice,” in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Ak. 8:289.

5. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 7.

6. Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” 86.

7. *Ibid.*

ence ordering, and sacrifice. This is clearly reflected both in Kant's detailed discussion of practical reason in the context of the hypothetical imperative and in the contemporary notion that a Kantian agent is capable of choosing what kinds of long-range goals and activities constitute a good *life*. A Kantian agent can be firmly committed to the goals that she freely sets.

But perhaps this response does not address the heart of Sandel's concern. Perhaps Sandel can still object that even though Kantian agents are not fickle end-setters, it is nevertheless the case that they are always free to sever the commitments they do make. In other words, even if Kantian agents are capable of long-term commitments, nothing binds them to these commitments in the way a preexisting notion of the good might. And, for this reason, nothing can "define" them absolutely; there is never an end or pursuit that cannot be abandoned at will.<sup>8</sup>

But there are at least two reasons that this should not be a concern—the first appeals to what we might call practical considerations, while the other appeals to moral considerations. To take the first: it is simply not the case that Kantian end-setters are always able to sever any of their commitments on a whim, without consequence to themselves or their community. Now, perhaps some commitments are like this; they can be abandoned without much consequence. A person who spends her childhood and adolescence pursuing a talent playing the violin might eventually decide to become a pediatrician with little spare time for playing her instrument. She might from time to time miss her former commitment, but there need be no serious practical consequences that stem from her choice. But other commitments are not so easily abandoned. If our pediatrician has spent the better part of a decade in medical training

8. Allen Buchanan suggests this interpretation of Sandel's argument. See Allen E. Buchanan, "Assessing the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," *Ethics* 99, no. 4 (1989): 852–882, at 867–868.

and sacrificed countless other projects in building her career, then it seems strange to insist that she can, practically speaking, “sever” her commitment to medicine on a whim.<sup>9</sup> Nor are careers and other major commitments the only pursuits that cannot be severed easily. Imagine the difficulties involved in ending a friendship with a coworker one has known for only a few years. Thus, in response to Sandel, we might say that the mere fact that we order our lives around our choices and live in a community with others creates a host of practical reasons that make commitments difficult to sever, even if there is no end toward which everyone in the community is mutually striving.

Furthermore, there are times when we impose various constraints upon ourselves precisely *because* we want to make it difficult to sever a commitment. So, for example, we may choose to make public marriage vows because we realize that our relationship with our spouse is worth preserving, and making such vows will, in times of stress, force us to try to work through our difficulties. And the fact that we create such constraints for ourselves is not a concession to the claim that we are incapable of commitment. Rather, we value such commitments, and, as Allen Buchanan puts it, such constraints “are devices we employ to create conditions under which genuine commitments can emerge.”<sup>10</sup>

These practical hindrances to severing commitments hint at a second reason that Kantian agents are not unencumbered, and this is a moral reason. Partially because of the sometimes-

9. Note that this is not a moral claim (though, as we will see, it can be the basis of a moral claim). The observation is not that our medical student “lets someone down” or fails her potential patients morally. Rather, it is just a claim about the way that any agent (including a Kantian agent) must order her preferences and commitments when she decides which long-term ends she wants to pursue. If she eventually abandons these ends and pursuits, her life can—practically speaking—experience some amount of turmoil.

10. Buchanan, “Assessing the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism,” 869–870.

negative effects of severing commitments, some freely chosen commitments and relationships actually create new obligations from which we cannot simply excuse ourselves. Parenthood is perhaps the most obvious of these commitments, but it is by no means an isolated example. When we make certain commitments and enter into certain relationships, others come to depend on us in their pursuit of their own ends. In Kant's terminology, when we enter into these kinds of relationships, we have an obligation adopt the ends of others, or to make others' ends our own. So, for example, a teacher or mentor in some sense adopts her students' ends of learning as her own. For her to abandon this kind of commitment without good reason would constitute a moral failing similar to a breach of contract.

Keeping this notion of adopting the ends of others in mind, we can now return to the passage from Kant's "Theory and Practice" essay that troubled Sandel so much. Above, we saw that Sandel takes issue with a system that is (seemingly) based on the idea of "external freedom" alone and that has "nothing to do" with the ends that we set as agents. But the context in which this passage appears should allay some of Sandel's fears. The passage appears in a section of the "Theory and Practice" essay entitled "On the Relation of Theory to Practice in the Right of a State" and is subtitled "Against Hobbes." The passage, in other words, deals with the foundation of what Kant calls duties of right, or the duties we have to each other that can be coerced with the threat of punishment. Kant argues "against Hobbes" in this passage by arguing that the basis of these duties of right is not a shared end that all members of a political society have, but rather the "harmony" of each person's freedom with "the freedom of everyone insofar as this is possible in accordance with a universal law."<sup>11</sup> But, as we have already seen, when it

11. "Theory and Practice," Ak 8:290.

comes to the obligations that Kantian agents have toward each other as *moral* agents, Kant is not unconcerned with the ends that people set. Rather, he thinks, we have a duty to think of the ends of others as our own.<sup>12</sup>

The second, crucial point to keep in mind with respect to the “Theory and Practice” passage (and any other passage in which Kant discusses the priority of the right over the good) is that Kant is only making claims about the *ground* of his moral system. Thus, Sandel’s claim that, for Kant, the right exists “prior to” and “independent of” the good is only partially correct. It is certainly true that Kant’s theory places the right “prior to” the good in deriving a supreme principle of morality and justifying right action. But it is not the case (as we will see in chapter 1) that the good is “independent” of the right. Rather, Kant will argue that agents who act from an understanding of the moral law necessarily also pursue a particular good. However, this good (Kant calls it the “highest good”) will be limited by—and stems from—our respect for humanity. So, despite the fact that Kant’s theory does not begin with a single, unifying idea of the good to be pursued, it is nevertheless the case that Kantian agents are concerned with pursuing an end.

### *Unattached to History or Narrative*

We are now in a position to consider a second set of objections. These objections, like those outlined above, begin from

12. In fairness to Sandel, of course, his is a criticism of liberalism, so we might understand his criticism to be limited to just those external duties of right that the passage discusses. Still, it is important to recall that Kant’s political philosophy is intended in large part to protect the capacity we have, as moral agents, to set and pursue ends. Thus, to think that Kant constructs a political theory out of whole cloth from the notion of freedom alone is, I think, misstating Kant’s project. This claim is, however, a matter of some debate. See, for example: Allen Wood, “The Final Form of Kant’s Practical Philosophy,” in *Kant’s Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretative Essays*, ed. Mark Timmons (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1–22. See, in the same volume, Paul Guyer, “Kant’s Deductions of the Principles of Right,” 23–64.

a set of observations about the freedom of Kantian agents. But instead of starting from an observation about agents' ability to freely set ends, these theories begin from the observation that the Kantian agent's will seems to be unaffected by circumstance or empirical limitation. So, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the Kantian picture that (allegedly) separates the will from limiting empirical conditions is a kind of "fantasy" in which "we live the story we please."<sup>13</sup> And, far from "freeing" the Kantian agent's will, they argue, this fact robs individuals' actions of meaning and alienates agents from their communities and commitments.

In considering this set of objections, however, we need to proceed with caution. If "liv[ing] the story we please" means being able to live whatever life we imagine for ourselves, regardless of the empirical limitations that history, geography, biology, and economics place in our way, then Kant cannot be saddled with this claim. It would be absurd to deny such limitations, and Kant's insistence, for example, that we ought to help those in need suggests an obvious recognition of the fact that states of affairs in the world can limit our ability to pursue ends. But there is also a very real sense in which Kant does think that our willing is independent of empirical facts. Once we understand Kant's claims to this effect, we will have a better sense of the type of objection that these philosophers advance.

The first sense in which Kant thinks we are free from empirical limitations, then, is one we have already seen. Kant thinks that agents are free to set ends for themselves and decide on their conception of a good life. We may, of course, be free to *set* ends for ourselves, but our freedom to pursue these ends is limited both by empirical facts about the world and,

13. Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition" in *Liberalism and Its Critics*, ed. Michael Sandel, 125–148, at 135 (New York: New York University Press, 1984). MacIntyre continues: "We enter a stage we did not design and find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making."



perhaps more importantly, by the requirements of the moral law. I might set the end of running a mile in under thirty seconds, but empirical limitations of physiology will certainly stand in the way of this. I may also set the end of appropriating my neighbor's wallet without his consent. Pursuing this end might not be limited by empirical facts, but it will be limited by the requirements of the moral law.

Above, we saw that Michael Sandel's worries about the liberal "unencumbered self" rested largely on observations about this first kind of Kantian freedom. And we also saw that these worries can be fairly easily put to rest by considering both a fuller picture of Kant's understanding of practical reasoning and Kant's claim that we have a duty to adopt the ends of others. But, within this description of freedom—specifically in the claim that our ends can be limited by a moral law that we recognize through the use of our pure practical reason—we can begin to understand another way in which Kant thinks our wills are separate from (or not necessarily affected by) nature.<sup>14</sup> The criticisms that Hegel, MacIntyre, and Taylor advance are, I think, best understood as objections to this sense of freedom.

One way in which our will is separate from nature has to do with our recognition of the moral law and the source of that law itself. Kant argues that, if we are to have a moral law that is necessary and universal, we must abstract from practical anthropology, or empirical facts of human existence, and instead base our moral theory on principles of pure practical reason.<sup>15</sup> The

14. John Rawls expresses these two senses of Kantian freedom in terms of our capacity to be "rational" (that is, our capacity to set ends and pursue our own conception of a good life) and "reasonable" (our capacity to recognize the requirements of morality and be independently moved by these requirements). See John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Barbara Herman, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 164–166.

15. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Ak 4:389.

claims of morality are not claims that stem from the will of a divine lawmaker, nor are they claims that stem from the particulars of the society in which we find ourselves. Furthermore, we do not need any special sense or access to empirical information in order to discover what the moral law requires of us. Our recognition of the moral law is, as Kant puts it, a “fact of reason.”<sup>16</sup>

Second, Kant thinks that when it comes to applying the moral law and being motivated to act from the moral law, we are autonomous. In other words, not only are we able to recognize the requirements of the moral law with the use of reason alone, we are also able to act from that recognition without the need for external motivation. And this, Kant argues, is not because we have a desire to follow the commands of the moral law that is simply stronger than our desire to follow the dictates of inclination. Rather, our recognition of the moral law is altogether different from other, empirical motivators. It can, as it were, overrule these other motivators. This, then, is the second sense in which Kant thinks we are free with respect to the forces of nature.<sup>17</sup>

Keeping in mind these two senses in which Kantian agents are not dictated by nature, we can now begin to explore the charges of emptiness and alienation put forth by philosophers such as Hegel, MacIntyre, and Taylor. To this end, it is useful to begin with Alasdair MacIntyre’s observations about the importance of narrative when it comes to the intelligibility of actions. MacIntyre argues that it is impossible to make actions “intelligible” except in the context of a setting or narrative. Thus, for example, when we see a woman gardening, it is im-

16. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*; trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Ak 5:31.

17. This is, of course, the standard picture of Kantian autonomy that we are familiar with. But Kant does suggest some exceptions to this story. For example, in the *Lectures on Ethics*, he explains that drunkenness can affect our will to the extent that it is not free in this respect. See Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Ak 27:288.

possible to know what she is really doing without the benefit of a larger context and narrative. Perhaps she is trying to impress the neighbors, or perhaps she is grudgingly taking care of chores, or relaxing after a stressful day.<sup>18</sup> So far, I think, there is nothing essential to Kant's thought that would force him to disagree. And it would be a rather uncharitable interpretation of MacIntyre's claim to say that this is the fullest extent of his argument. Rather, we can begin to get a better sense of what is really at issue for MacIntyre when we consider his claim that this problem of unintelligibility is intensified when we extrapolate it, as it were, to make sense not just of individual actions, but of the actions and decisions of a community, and of that community's conception of the good: "In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer to that is its unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask 'What is good for me' is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask 'what is good for man' is to ask what all answers to the former questions have in common."<sup>19</sup>

MacIntyre's claim, then, is not just that individual actions are unintelligible without some kind of unifying narrative, but that—more seriously—moral actions, or actions that we undertake based on our understanding of what is right or good, are unintelligible without the benefit of a unifying narrative. Or, put slightly differently, MacIntyre's claim is that an action done for the sake a moral law based in reason alone is as unintelligible as an individual action that exists apart from any unifying story or narrative. And, indeed, a moral theory that insists that we can discern and act upon morality's requirements through the use of reason alone is not just unintelligible; it is also alienating. Rather than being able to act morally because we have a set of conceptions about what is good for us—for example, fam-

18. MacIntyre, "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition," 128–129.

19. *Ibid.*, 141.

ily, political life, or friendship—we are forced to adopt a universal morality that actually abstracts from these central institutions and relationships. In essence, as Charles Taylor puts it, we lose “our identification with the society in which [we live].”<sup>20</sup> Thus, when we turn away from a moral theory that is unified by a narrative and strives to complete that narrative, we ultimately adopt a theory that is empty, unintelligible, and alienating.

To understand the force of this criticism, it will be helpful at this point to look at its clear ancestor in Hegel’s criticisms of Kant’s theory of freedom. Contrary to what is perhaps generally assumed, Hegel does not necessarily take issue with the idea of drawing a divide between the realm of natural causality and that of a free, rational will. The problem that Hegel sees in Kant’s theory is that, having created this divide, Kant does nothing to bridge the gap again. In other words, there is a sense in which Hegel is a critic of Kant’s theory because he thinks Kant doesn’t go *far enough* with his theory of freedom. Having separated freedom and nature, Hegel thinks, Kant leaves them separated, and this is precisely what Hegel cites as the source of the shortcomings of Kant’s moral theory.

Hegel is fairly clear, for example, in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that he thinks Kant’s division between freedom and nature is an important one. By way of introducing his discussion of Kant, he says: “It is a great advance when the principle is established that freedom is the last hinge on which man turns, a highest possible pinnacle, which allows nothing further to be imposed upon it; thus man bows to no authority, and acknowledges no obligations, where his freedom is not respected.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, as we have already seen, Hegel is misrepresenting Kant’s theory of freedom to a certain extent. Kant’s

20. Charles Taylor, “Hegel, History and Politics” in *Liberalism and Its Critics*, ed. Michael Sandel (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 177–199, at 191.

21. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (New York: Humanities Press, 1974), 459.

sense of freedom is not one in which no authority or obligation is recognized. Being free is being subject to a moral law that one gives to oneself, and not some sort of arbitrary freedom in which we merely do whatever we like. But despite this overstatement, Hegel's admiration of the idea of freedom still stands, and is further echoed in several passages in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. In the introductory sections of his work, Hegel begins with the same concept of freedom. So, for example, he explains that "the will contains the element of *pure indeterminacy* or of the 'I's pure reflection into itself, in which every limitation, every content, whether present immediately through nature, through needs, desires, and drives, or given and determined in some other way, is dissolved."<sup>22</sup>

In fact, Hegel has his own terminology for this type of freedom—he calls it "personal freedom."<sup>23</sup> When I act under personal freedom, I choose which of my desires I will follow. My act is my own, and not determined by external forces.<sup>24</sup> And Hegel does not think that personal freedom is unimportant. In fact, he reserves a special sphere of rights, a sphere that he calls "abstract right," for this kind of freedom. Abstract right provides a site for personal freedom and includes, for example, the right to do whatever one wishes to do with one's own personal property, so long as this does not interfere with the rights

22. G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), section 5.

23. For an especially informative discussion of the types of freedom in Hegel's political thought, see Frederick Neuhaus, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For simplicity's sake, in this discussion I focus only on what Hegel and Neuhaus call the "external realization" of the three types of freedom discussed here. Hegel is also concerned with another aspect of freedom, characterized in his claim that freedom consists of "being with oneself in another." Though this sense of freedom is essential to fully understanding Hegel's own theory, for the purposes of comparing his notion of freedom with Kant's, I leave it aside here. For a discussion of these two aspects of Hegelian freedom, see Neuhaus, 20–24.

24. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, section 35.

of others.<sup>25</sup> Though Hegel seems to associate personal freedom with Kant's philosophy (for example, in the passage quoted above), Kant is also clearly concerned with a second type of freedom that Hegel calls "moral freedom." This type of freedom, according to Hegel, is the type of freedom we use when we act on a rule or principle that we give to ourselves, or when we limit our behavior based on our conception of moral conduct.<sup>26</sup> Generalizing, then, we might say that Hegel's notion of "personal freedom" is similar to Kant's idea of humanity, understood in terms of a rational will that is able to set ends for itself, while "moral freedom" is similar to Kant's notion of personality or autonomy, the ability to act on a law one gives to oneself.

But what is crucial to note about both of these types of freedom is that Hegel does not think that we can even make sense of what is important about them, or what kinds of decisions to make with them, without a broader story about the social life we lead. Without this additional information, these initial types of freedom are essentially without content. To understand Hegel's claim, it is perhaps useful to draw an analogy with Hegel's criticisms of Kant's categorical imperative. Hegel's criticism in that context is that Kant abstracts so much information in order to find a principle of morality that is necessary and universal that he robs the categorical imperative of the information necessary to make decisions and motivate agents. Indeed, Hegel thinks, in order to get his procedure to work, Kant is actually forced to smuggle in empirical information about, for example, the consequences of telling lies.<sup>27</sup>

Similar concerns about the emptiness of abstraction mo-

25. *Ibid.*, section 42. Since we practice our personal freedom by appropriating and using parts of the physical world, an account of property rights makes sense as part of the account of personal freedom.

26. Neuhausser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory*: 25.

27. G. W. F. Hegel, *Natural Law: The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 80.

tivate Hegel's worries about the incompleteness of personal and moral freedoms. Recall that personal freedom, for Hegel, consists in our ability to choose which desires to follow. Moral freedom, we might say, stands in a kind of hierarchical and limiting relationship to personal freedom. Through the use of moral freedom, we are able to choose a course of action that accords with our own conception of what is right or good. But without some further information about what is right and good, or where we might look in order to discover these facts, any account of moral and personal freedom runs the risk of being empty.<sup>28</sup> Thus, in order to decide "*when* freedom in the ordinary sense is objectively valuable, and when it is not" Hegel thinks we need to introduce a third type of freedom.<sup>29</sup> This type of freedom is what Hegel calls social freedom, and it exists within what he calls "ethical life."

Hegel's claim in the *Philosophy of Right* is that, within the sphere of ethical life, a subject's duties are defined through the role that he or she plays in that community, understood as a collection of "rational social institutions."<sup>30</sup> These rational social institutions thus provide content and direction for moral and personal freedom. As Hegel explains: "In an ethical community, it is easy to say *what* someone must do and *what* the duties are which he has to fulfill in order to be virtuous. He must simply do what is prescribed, expressly stated, and known to him within his situation."<sup>31</sup> And though passages like this one may make it seem as though Hegel wants us simply to obey (perhaps

28. In Kant's moral philosophy, of course, this information is provided by pure practical reason. But this will not satisfy Hegel. As Neuhausser puts it, Hegelian "moral subjects lack the resources to give complete, non-arbitrary content to the concept of the good" (32).

29. Allen Wood, editor's introduction to Kant, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, xv. See also Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 36-40.

30. Neuhausser, 32.

31. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, section 150.

reluctantly) the dictates of our community and institutions, Hegel thinks that this sense of compulsion is not part of ethical life. Rather, these institutions are themselves intended to reflect the roles we already play in our personal lives.

The fact that rational social institutions are constructed to reflect our roles as private citizens explains, then, how it is easier for a person in Hegel's society to *know* what his duty is, and why it is easier for the member of this society to act on this knowledge, once recognized. In ethical life, Hegel thinks, one loses the sense of separation between oneself and others that is (allegedly) a part of the Kantian picture. For Hegel, life in his society is a form of "being-with-oneself-in-another" that makes it less likely that I will view my needs as conflicting with the needs of others. The analogy often suggested for this idea is that of the relationship between organs and the body that they make up. The individual organ's role and purpose is to support the functioning of the body, which, in turn, supports the existence of the organ. In this sense, one might say, the organ's "interests" just are the interests of the whole.

It is worth noting at this point the similarities that contemporary theories share with Hegel's concerns about the lack of content in personal and moral freedom. As I read him, Alasdair MacIntyre is making a similar point when he worries that abstract, universal laws that apply to "man as such" are a "painful illusion." Without a further story to tell about how laws are grounded in a conception of the good, or how they help us advance toward the ends of a narrative, MacIntyre, like Hegel, thinks such laws are essentially empty. MacIntyre's solution to this problem is, as we have seen, to ensure that human activity is always placed within the context of a narrative that provides meaning. Hegel's solution for reunifying the realms of freedom and nature lies in his account of Social Freedom and *Sittlichkeit*, or Ethical Life. For Hegel, citizens can make sense of their other freedoms only when they are a part of this



system. Social Freedom and Ethical Life provide content and meaning to all the other freedoms we have and value.

*A Kantian Conception of Community (An Overview)*

The remainder of the discussion in this book is in many respects a response to the type of criticism raised by Hegel and contemporary philosophers who criticize Kant's theory on the grounds that it lacks a meaning-providing narrative or unifying goal. Of course, there is a sense in which no interpretation of Kantian ethics will be able to satisfy the conditions that these critics set for intelligibility. A central and unmovable tenet of Kant's moral philosophy is, and must be, that the source of the moral law (and thus the ultimate justification for moral action) stems from reason alone. A Kantian will never be able to locate the ground of morality in a teleological conception of goodness alone, nor can the ground of morality be dictated by what is good for a community, as Hegel understands it.

But there is another sense in which Kant's moral philosophy can easily rise to the challenge that these critics set forth. This is because involved in the very moral law that our reason recognizes as universally binding and necessary is a notion of an end or goal toward which moral action is geared. One of the main tasks of chapter 1 will be to demonstrate how this is possible within the context of Kant's theory. There, I argue several crucial points: first, that Kant's ethics, though strictly speaking non-teleological and non-consequentialist, is importantly goal oriented. Second, that this goal is best understood as an ethical community, achievable on earth within the course of human history. Third, I argue that, once we recognize this fact, we are able to see that, while the initial justification of Kantian morality stems from reason alone, this very understanding of morality issues forth a notion of the goals of morality that can help guide and justify future actions.

By the end of the first chapter, I will have argued that Kant's most plausible and mature account of the highest good is one in which this goal is shared by a community as an end of human history. However, I will still need to show not just that the highest good is a state of affairs that agents *enjoy* communally, but also that it is a state of affairs that agents can *work toward* communally. So, in chapter 2, I outline what I take to be Kant's theory of moral choice and action and argue that it allows for a crucial social component. Specifically, Kant's theory of moral choice and action makes most sense if we see Kantian agents as involved in a project of developing a moral character that is based on their recognition of the moral law. This account of a Kantian moral character, I argue, has two major benefits. First, it allows for a much more plausible account of moral choice and action than an account that describes agents as making countless individual moral decisions. Second, it helps us see how community could be involved in our progress toward the highest good. Specifically, I will argue, social institutions and relationships are central to developing this moral character in agents. And, of course, with moral character thus encouraged and developed, agents are in a better position to pursue and achieve the end of the highest good.

In chapters 3 through 5, I examine in detail the various social institutions that play a role in helping us accomplish the highest good, in the form of an ethical community. In chapter 3, I examine Kant's philosophy of education, and argue that, despite appearances to the contrary, Kant's philosophy of education is entirely consistent with his moral epistemology and account of moral motivation. His account of early education emphasizes discipline, to be sure, but the goal of such discipline—and moral education in general—is to foster a character that is receptive to learning and to applying the moral law. We will see that Kant has a carefully organized plan for education, one that teaches children to appreciate the value of their own

freedom and ultimately respect this value in others. As Kant himself points out, education is thus an irreplaceable component of a community's progress toward the highest good.<sup>32</sup>

Chapter 4 examines the role that friendship plays in the development of moral character. Kant follows Aristotle in outlining several types of friendship, and I argue that one type of friendship in particular, one that Kant calls "moral friendship," provides a sense of complete trust in which agents are able to engage in moral self-examination and improvement, without fear of the types of judgment and comparison that pervade other relationships. The ability to examine and improve upon oneself morally is, of course, a crucial part of developing a moral character that will be more likely to pursue the end of an ethical community.

Chapter 5 argues that civic life and public participation are also key components in our progress toward the highest good. The first section in this chapter argues that a system of externally coercible laws can in fact play an important role in such progress toward the highest good, despite its being founded upon an awareness of human imperfection. Specifically, such laws make it possible for virtuous agents to pursue and sometimes accomplish the ends that they set for themselves, even if they live in society with others who are not motivated by the moral law (and who may, therefore, thwart others' pursuit of their ends). The second part of chapter 5 argues that participation in civic life and a republican government contributes to our progress toward the highest good by fostering our ability to think for ourselves and to think from the standpoint of others. These two capacities, Kant argues, are crucial to our ability to reason morally—and thus achieve an ethical community.

What appears throughout the discussion that follows, then,

32. Immanuel Kant, "Lectures on Pedagogy," in *History, Anthropology, and Education*, trans. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Ak 9:448.

## INTRODUCTION

is that Kant's moral philosophy is concerned with community on several different levels and that, ideally, the Kantian agent's life will be marked by involvement in community from early education through adulthood. Kantian agents have an obligation to pursue a communal end, and they do so by participating fully in social institutions and relationships. Far from being isolated and unattached agents, then, Kantian agents are—and are expected to be—deeply concerned with and involved in their communities.



# KANT'S CONCEPT OF THE HIGHEST GOOD



WE HAVE SEEN that many critics charge Kant with having an atomistic, ahistorical, and undesirably individualistic moral theory. However, when we take into account the fact that Kant's moral theory places value upon agents who set and pursue ends for themselves, it becomes clear that Kant's moral theory is one that has the foundational apparatus for an account of moral life that is both goal directed and connected to the projects of others. Kant makes this point most strongly—though perhaps just as obscurely—with his concept of the highest (derived) good.<sup>1</sup> Kant defines the highest good as that state which obtains when the greatest possible virtue occurs in conjunction with the greatest possible happiness consistent with that virtue. This definition and much of the conceptual framework of Kant's idea of the highest good remain unchanged over the course of his writing. However, I argue with other commentators that over the course of his life and writing, Kant significantly revises his position on how the highest good is to be achieved. And when we consider Kant's sketch of the highest good in what is its final and most complete form, we are presented with new insight into Kant's moral philosophy. Specifically, we are presented with a moral system that has as its goal a kind of moral community whose members are governed by the moral law. And

1. The highest derived good is contrasted with the highest original good, or God. For simplicity's sake, references to the "highest good" in this discussion will be to the former.

this fact, in turn, leads us to several other conclusions. First, we come to see the crucial role that various institutions play in helping us to progress more effectively toward this goal. Second, and more theoretically, we come to see not just that Kant's moral theory is one that has as its goal a kind of moral community, but also that it is one that includes this goal of the moral community as part of its very justification of moral action.

This chapter sketches the conceptual foundations of Kant's idea of the highest good, as well as the changes that this concept undergoes with respect to Kant's description of how it is to be realized. The first section introduces Kant's idea of the highest good and pays close attention to Kant's claim that the highest good is the *object* of moral action. This claim might seem, at first, to be a problematic one—on the face of things, a theory about the goal or state of affairs that a moral theory strives toward seems to depart from the well-known Kantian imperative to act for the sake of duty itself, and not for the sake of imagined outcomes. Nevertheless, careful examination of Kant's theory demonstrates that Kant's claims about the object of moral action are perfectly consistent with a non-consequentialist theory and, indeed, stem from the requirements of practical reason.

The second section of the chapter examines Kant's changing views about how the highest good can and ought to be realized. This section begins with a discussion of the more individualistic and theological account that appears in earlier works, most notably the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and concludes with an examination of Kant's account of the ethical community in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. In this section, I argue that Kant's most considered conception of the highest good is one that views this object of morality as a shared goal that moral agents ought to strive to accomplish on earth, over the course of history.

The third section of this chapter considers how the interpretation of the highest good that I argue for affects Kant's

views about so-called radical evil. I argue that the account of the highest good argued for in the second section of the chapter actually provides a plausible solution to the worries posed by the problem of radical evil. However, recognizing this solution requires us to reconceive some of the ways that we think of moral agency, especially with respect to moral improvement.

The final section of this book also investigates the extent to which Kant's theory of the highest good—and his ultimate conclusions about how the highest good is to be accomplished—make his moral philosophy importantly social. I argue that, at the very least, we should see Kant's moral philosophy as concerned with a social end (the ethical community) and that we should also recognize our obligations to work toward this end as a community. But I also argue that Kant's theory of the highest good tells us something crucial about the justification for moral action. Specifically, it tells us that when we are considering a proposed course of action, the object of moral action should already be in our sights as part of the justification for that action. And since this object is best understood as a kind of ethical community, part of the Kantian justification for moral action will be that an action contributes to the achievement of such a community.

### *An Overview of Kant's Concept of the Highest Good*

The highest good—or the object of moral action—is achieved, for Kant, when maximal virtue and the maximal happiness consistent with such virtue exist together in a specific kind of relationship.<sup>2</sup> In the discussion of the highest good in the *Critique of*

2. It bears remarking that when Kant speaks of maximal virtue and maximal happiness, we should not think that these things can be measured in "units" according to his system. For an individual, maximal virtue would consist of avoiding moral error, and probably developing a kind of virtuous character. Maximal happiness is a trickier concept, but we can think of maximal happiness for an individual consisting in having all of his ends fulfilled. But importantly, Kant is



*Practical Reason*, Kant begins by describing two ways in which such a relationship between virtue and happiness could be understood. The first, he says, is an analytic relationship between the two, and this is the kind of relationship that the Stoics and Epicureans presented when they attempted to demonstrate a connection between virtue and happiness. For the Epicureans, according to Kant, "the concept of virtue was already present in the maxim of promoting one's own happiness."<sup>3</sup> In other words, what Kant calls prudence, or the ability to attain the sources of one's own happiness, also constituted morality and virtue for the Epicureans. For them, Kant explains, "happiness was the whole highest good."<sup>4</sup> The Stoic approach to uniting virtue and happiness was similarly analytic, but, of course, focused not on the attainment of happiness, but rather on the perfection of one's virtue. For the Stoics, simply "to be conscious of one's virtue [was] happiness."<sup>5</sup> For them "the feeling of happiness was already contained in the consciousness of one's virtue."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, in both the Epicurean and Stoic views, the relationship between virtue and happiness was one of identity, and thus analytic. We might, at first, be tempted to think that Kant, too, takes the view that the relationship between virtue and happiness is an analytic one. Though it is clear that Kant could never adopt the Epicurean view that happiness is "the whole highest good,"<sup>7</sup> we might be tempted to think that Kant could have had something like a Stoic view in mind, in which virtue (or at least the knowledge of one's virtue) constitutes the greatest happiness that can be achieved. Indeed, Kant does think that we experience a sense of "contentment" from knowing that we have acted from respect for the moral law,<sup>8</sup> and we might equate

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concerned only that agents achieve as much happiness as is consistent with virtue, so ends that are achieved at the expense of morality are, so to speak, disqualified.

3. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:112.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., Ak 5:111.

6. Ibid., Ak 5:112.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., Ak 5:117.

this sense of contentment with the sense of happiness that the Stoic receives from awareness of his virtue. However, for Kant, the sense of contentment that arises from doing one's duty is not the kind of happiness that constitutes part of the highest good. Rather, the kind of happiness that Kant has in mind in the context of the highest good is one that probably aligns itself more closely with the kind of happiness we have in mind when we use the term in our everyday speech—it is the feeling one gets when things go according to one's wishes, or, as Kant defines it, “the state of a rational being in the world in the whole of whose existence *everything goes according to his wish and will*.”<sup>9</sup> So, while Kant shares with the Stoics the view that some kind of contentment arises from being virtuous, he departs from them in his claim that there is more than an analytic connection between virtue and happiness. Rather, he thinks, there is a synthetic relationship between virtue and happiness in which one actually *causes* the other. And since it is clear that, for Kant, happiness cannot cause virtue, we are left with one remaining option—that virtue causes happiness. How, exactly, virtue causes happiness will be a question for the second section of this chapter, since Kant's views about the answer to this question appear to change over the course of his writings. But for the time being, it is important only to keep in mind that Kant thinks that virtue and happiness exist together in this kind of causal relationship. We cannot, as it were, will a moral action without also willing (directly or indirectly) some amount of happiness, be it our own or someone else's.

One observation that may immediately come to mind upon hearing this description of Kant's account of the highest good is that it seems at odds with an understanding of Kantian morality in which our interests in happiness have no value, and the only thing of any value is autonomous agency, or a morally

9. Ibid., Ak 5:124.

good will (take, for example, Kant's famous opening statement of the *Groundwork*).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, at one point in the *Groundwork*, Kant comes very close to denigrating inclination and happiness when he claims that "it must . . . be the universal wish of every rational being to be altogether free from [inclination]."<sup>11</sup> This apparent contradiction causes Lewis White Beck, in his commentary on the *Critique of Practical Reason*, to charge Kant with surrendering the key component of his moral theory—autonomy itself: "Kant simply cannot have it both ways. He cannot say that the highest good is a motive for the pure will, and then say that it is so only under the human limitation that man must have an object which is not exclusively moral. . . . It is clear that to admit the latter human—all-too-human—fact into the determination of conduct in accord with moral norms is to surrender autonomy."<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, Beck argues here, Kant has at no point changed his view about the imperative to act, not for the sake of some expected outcome, but rather for the sake of duty. This imperative, Beck correctly observes, is closely linked to central notions of freedom and autonomy. While a will that is not free is necessitated to act in response to natural causes, an autonomous will is one that is not subject to such necessitation, and is one that can guide its actions according to the moral law that it gives to itself. This is the idea behind Kant's numerous assertions that the moral law is the causal law of a morally free will and what scholars have dubbed the "reciprocity thesis," the idea that an agent's freedom and her being bound by the moral law mutually imply one another.<sup>13</sup>

10. "It is impossible to think of anything in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will." Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:393.

11. *Ibid.*, Ak 4:428.

12. Lewis White Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 244.

13. This term was coined by Henry Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

One the other hand, Beck argues, with Kant's theory of the highest good, we have what seems to be a sudden shift away from these central ideas. Kant seems now to allow inclination and sensibility to play an important—indeed *necessary*—role in his moral theory. After all, even if the highest good and the satisfaction of select inclinations is only *part* of the *object* of moral action, it is still a necessary component of moral action. Kant is clear on this point—given the requirements of practical reason, we simply could not act from duty if we did not have in mind an object that combined the totality of virtue with the greatest amount of happiness consistent with such a totality. To admit such a factor into Kant's moral theory is, according to Beck, to strip it of its focus on autonomy entirely.

But despite Kant's strong stance in the *Groundwork* passages cited above, and despite Lewis White Beck's worries, there is room in Kant's moral theory for his insistence that happiness be part of the highest good. Specifically, when we examine our capacity for humanity, the capacity that Kant takes to have ultimate moral value, we see that the highest good is already, in some sense, built into Kant's fundamental claims about the value of humanity.

In the *Groundwork*, Kant's famous formula of humanity charges us to act in such a way that uses humanity "*always at the same time as an end, [and] never merely as a means.*"<sup>14</sup> We have this obligation, Kant says, because "*rational nature exists as an end in itself.*"<sup>15</sup> This rational nature, then, is what Kant understands when he uses the term *humanity*. But, of course, our rational nature as sensible beings is not limited to pondering analytic truths and thinking about the moral law. Rather, as rational and sensible beings, we set ends for ourselves and seek ways of pursuing those ends. Thus, in the "Doctrine of Virtue," Kant says that humanity is "characterized" by "the capacity to

14. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:429.

15. *Ibid.*, Ak 4:428–429.

set oneself an end—any end whatsoever.”<sup>16</sup> The fact that our capacity to set and pursue ends exists as an end in itself has, in turn, important implications for the role of inclination and happiness in Kant’s moral philosophy. This is for the simple reason that inclination provides the “material” with which our rational nature sets ends.<sup>17</sup> Of course, I must decide which ends to pursue; I must order my preferences and make various sacrifices for the sake of my chosen ends. And, of course, I can pursue these ends morally only if I first check my inclinations and the ends suggested by them against what the moral law requires of me, or against the ends of others. But assuming that my ends are consistent with the moral law, I am free to pursue the goals suggested by inclination with impunity. And this is not just a concession on Kant’s part. In a sense, our capacity to pursue the ends suggested by inclination, in conjunction with our capacity to restrain those ends when required by pure practical reason (morality), is precisely what makes us worthy of moral consideration in the first place.

Kant’s emphasis on humanity also has important implications for how we conceive of the role of happiness within his system. Far from being something that we must always deny ourselves in order to be virtuous, happiness is intimately connected with the very capacity to set and pursue ends that makes us worthy of moral consideration. As noted earlier, Kant tells us that happiness is just that state we are in when things go according to our “wish and will.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, we are happy when the ends that we set for ourselves are fulfilled. Our desire for happiness is thus a natural consequence of the fact that we are rational and yet sensible beings. Indeed, Kant tells us that

16. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, translated by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Ak 6:392.

17. See generally Paul Guyer, “Ends of Reason and Ends of Nature: The Place of Teleology in Kant’s Ethics,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 36, nos. 2–3 (2002): 161–186.

18. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:124.

"to be happy is necessarily the demand of every rational but finite being and therefore an unavoidable determining ground of its faculty of desire."<sup>19</sup>

In addition, there is a second reason for thinking that there need not be any contradiction in Kant's thinking that morality and happiness are somehow connected, and this has to do with the way we think of the relationship between inclination and freedom in Kant's system. Broadly speaking, there are two ways one can think about this relationship. Depending on which view we adopt, the idea that happiness is part of the object of morality may seem more or less palatable. First, one might think that Kant's account suggests a deep opposition between inclination and freedom. Such an interpretation is suggested, as we saw earlier, by the opposition between freedom and inclination that Kant sometimes sets up in the *Groundwork*. There, it seems, to act freely just is to act morally, and to act immorally is to be guided by natural impulse rather than by a freely chosen maxim. This interpretation motivates Henry Sidgwick's famous objection that, for Kant, one can essentially never be responsible for moral wrongdoing, since immorality occurs in just those moments when one is not free and could not have acted otherwise.<sup>20</sup> A free will, on such an account, could not choose anything *but* the right course of action, since the moral law is the causal law of a free will.<sup>21</sup> This suggests that when we "choose" the wrong course of action, we are not choosing at all, but rather simply being determined by our sensible nature.

19. Ibid., Ak 5:25.

20. See Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (New York: Hackett, 1981), 511–515. At 515: "When Freedom is said to be a 'causality according to immutable laws' . . . this evidently cannot mean merely a faculty of laying down laws which may or may not be obeyed; it must mean that the will, *qua* free, acts in accordance with those laws;—the human being, doubtless, often acts contrary to them; but then, according to this view, its choice in such actions is determined not 'freely' but 'mechanically,' by 'physical' and 'empirical' springs of action."

21. See, for example: *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:452, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:54–55, 5:103.

Of course, given what I have already said about the connection between material principles and the principles of morality, we can see that this is not an entirely accurate portrayal of the relationship between inclination and morality in Kant. And it bears keeping in mind that Kant's stated aim in the *Groundwork* is to abstract from practical anthropology in order to locate the supreme principle of morality.<sup>22</sup> The problem is not, in other words, that inclination always leads us afoul of the moral law, but rather that inclination cannot serve as the *ground* for a necessary and universal principle of morality. A second interpretation that reflects this observation argues that the formal principle of morality serves more or less as a kind of check on our inclinations; this interpretation acknowledges that we are constantly affected by our inclinations, and are, ideally at least, constantly comparing these against what the moral law requires of us. As Allen Wood puts it, "even when we act from sensuous motives, we do so as having the capacity to be moved by the *a priori* law of reason. . . . If our actions were sensuously necessitated, as by natural determinism, then it would follow that they are all performed from sensuous motives. The converse of this does not hold, however. Not every action performed from sensuous motives must be naturally necessitated."<sup>23</sup> Such an interpretation is closely connected to Kant's later account of moral choice in the *Religion*, where he argues that instead of a series of choices between inclination and morality, moral agents actually make a fundamental choice to subordinate self-love to the moral law (or vice versa).<sup>24</sup> Not only does this later account make sense of how it is possible for an agent to freely choose immorality, it also allows for a more

22. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:388.

23. Allen Wood, "Kant's Compatibilism" in *Self and Nature in Kant's Philosophy*, ed. Allen Wood, 73–101 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), at 78.

24. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. Allen Wood and George DiGiovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ak 6:36.

plausible relationship of priority between freedom and inclination, as opposed to the relationship of opposition suggested by the first account.

All of this points to an important observation about Kant's account of human happiness—namely, that there is nothing in Kant's account to suggest that virtue and happiness are necessarily opposed to one another. Indeed, far from their being opposed to one another, we can begin to see just how closely the two are linked. It is our ability to set ends for ourselves that makes us worthy of moral consideration, and it is in fulfilling those ends that we are happy. Of course, we are by no means entitled to any end whatsoever, and it is our duty to revise our ends so that they can be consistent with the moral law. So as Kant puts it, the “*distinction* of the principle of happiness from that of morality is not, for this reason, at once an *opposition* between them, and pure practical reason does not require that one should *renounce* claims to happiness but only that as soon as duty is in question one should *take no account* of them.”<sup>25</sup>

But even if, as Kant makes clear, there is no necessary *opposition* between virtue and happiness, we might still wonder at his claim that there is some necessary *connection* between happiness and virtue that is not a simple analytic one. Indeed, it is Kant's claim that happiness follows from virtue. How can Kant make such a claim?

The claim that virtue causes happiness seems, at first glance, a rather difficult one to justify. And, in fact, Kant himself was troubled by the lack of empirical evidence for this claim in the world. Certainly, it does not require much effort to think of examples of virtuous individuals who are unhappy, sometimes even because of their virtue. And, of course, the reverse can just as easily be said about the contented life that many who shun virtue lead. As we will see in the following sec-

25. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:93.



tion, it was this pessimism that virtue could never lead to happiness in this world that led Kant—at one stage—to postulate the existence of God and an afterlife. But, in any case, Kant is not making an argument based on the empirical observation that happiness *does* follow from virtue. Rather, his is a logical claim that, given certain facts about morality and human willing, happiness *must* follow from virtue.

Kant says that the highest good—the greatest possible happiness that is consistent with maximal virtue—is “an *a priori* necessary object of our will.”<sup>26</sup> This follows from two facts about morality and our practical reason. First, Kant takes it as given that we are bound by the moral law. This, he thinks, is a “fact of reason.”<sup>27</sup> Though Kant suggests several different interpretations of this “fact of reason” in the passages where he discusses it, we may for our purposes think of Kant’s claim about the “fact of reason” as a claim that our awareness of the moral law and its bindingness is implicit in “our everyday moral thought, feeling, and judgment.”<sup>28</sup> But Kant also makes a second crucial claim about our practical reason: that to “need happiness, to be also worthy of it, and yet not to participate in it cannot be consistent with the perfect volition of a rational being.”<sup>29</sup> What does Kant mean by “worthiness to be happy,” and why does being worthy to be happy mean we must “participate in it”? The answer to the first question lies in the fact that, according to Kant, happiness is conditioned by morality. If I pursue an end that will make me happy, but do so by disregarding the moral law, then I am not worthy of the happiness that I receive; that happiness is a moral evil.<sup>30</sup> But, if we are “worthy of happiness”—that is, if our pursuit of happiness is appropriately

26. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:114.

27. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:31.

28. Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, 255.

29. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:110.

30. On this idea, and on Kant’s further argument concerning the highest good, see Allen Wood, *Kant’s Moral Religion* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970), 69–152.

conditioned by our recognition of the moral law—Kant thinks it is inconsistent with our volition not to enjoy such happiness, or at least expect to enjoy such happiness. In other words, Kant thinks that it is a fact about our practical reason that we cannot will moral action if we do not also have in mind some object that unifies moral action with the realization of as much happiness as is consistent with such moral action. More to the point, we could not even *act* upon the moral law if we were not certain that this object—the highest good—could be attained. Thus, Kant explains: “Pure practical reason . . . seeks the unconditioned for the practically conditioned (which rests on inclinations and natural needs), not indeed as the determining ground of the will, but even when this is given (in the moral law), it seeks the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason, under the name of the *highest good*.”<sup>31</sup>

Put in these terms, Kant's justification for the highest good and our duty to promote it might seem a little ad hoc. But Kant is not simply positing that reason seeks an “unconditioned totality” or that it is inconsistent with “the perfect volition of a rational being” to be virtuous and yet not happy. Rather, these claims follow from Kant's theory, and there is good reason to accept Kant's assertion if we keep two things in mind: first, that the moral law that Kant thinks we know through pure practical reason is one that finds value in our capacity to set and pursue ends, and second, that happiness, for Kant, consists in fulfilling one's freely chosen ends.

To better understand the link between virtue and happiness, it is useful to examine the difference, for Kant, between the ground of moral action and the object of such action. Very generally, we can think of the ground of a moral act as the justifying reasons for that action. Thus, to take a *non*-Kantian example, the ground of my action might be to maximize happi-

31. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:108.

ness or pursue some other set of goods. The object of an action, on the other hand, is the goal one hopes to achieve through that action. Now, of course, for many moral theories, the ground of moral action and the object of moral action are the same thing, that is, the object of an action can actually serve as its ground. Such theories are considered teleological; the justifying reasons for an act have to do with bringing about a certain goal or object. So for example, my object in acting might be to bring about the most happiness, and, if pressed for a justifying reason for my action, I might respond that it is the very fact of expected happiness that justifies my action.

Of course, this is not the case for Kant. For Kant, the ground of moral action is the moral law, which is universal and necessary because of its source in pure practical reason.<sup>32</sup> In the following passage from the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant explains why this, rather than any expected object, must be the ground of moral action:

Now it is indeed undeniable that every volition must also have an object and hence a matter; but the matter is not, just because of this, the determining ground and condition of the maxim; for if it is, then the maxim cannot be presented in the form of giving universal law, since expectation of the existence of the object would then be the determining cause of choice, and the dependence of the faculty of desire upon the existence of some thing would have to be put at the basis of volition; and since this dependence can be sought only in empirical conditions, it can never furnish the basis for a necessary and universal rule.<sup>33</sup>

And this is precisely where Kant's account allows for a split between the ground and the object of moral action. When I act

32. Though, as I will argue in the last section of this book, the fact that the ground and object—though not identical—are closely intertwined in Kant's theory allows us to think of the object of the highest good as *part* of the ground of moral action.

33. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:34.

morally, the ground of my action might be to respect or promote humanity and autonomy, but the object of my action is usually not the same. Of course, there might be cases in which I set out explicitly to promote humanity (say, by teaching a child to reason well). But in general, what characterizes humanity is just that it consists of formulating, setting, and pursuing ends. Thus, for the most part, when a Kantian agent acts morally, the grounds of her action will have to do with preserving humanity, but the object of her action will involve more than just this. The object of her action will have to do with making sure that her and others' ends are fulfilled—as long as this is consistent with morality. Thus, since happiness consists of having our ends fulfilled, the object of moral action will involve happiness at some level.

Because the moral law is concerned with humanity, and because humanity has to do with setting ends, the ground and object of moral action come apart only to a limited extent for Kant. Of course, the ground of action must take precedence; we must always limit our pursuit of happiness (our own and others') with our recognition of the moral law. And, in justifying our action, we cannot simply appeal to the fact that the action is expected to produce happiness; rather we must appeal to the moral law. But in another sense, because the moral law is one that protects and promotes our capacity for end setting, the object of our action is never very far removed from considerations about the ground of action. So it should be relatively unsurprising, then, that Kant thinks we cannot will to be "worthy of happiness" and yet not "participate" in it.<sup>34</sup> Our practical reason simply could not make sense of an a priori requirement to respect and sometimes promote the ends that others set for themselves while at the same time being faced with the realization that those ends will not be fulfilled.

But, we might ask ourselves, isn't Kant making the re-

34. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:110.

quirements of our practical reason a little strong in his argument? Kant's claim with respect to the highest good is that our awareness of the moral law and its bindingness, in conjunction with the requirements of practical reason listed above, forces us to conclude that happiness follows from virtue. The conjunction of perfect virtue and the happiness consistent with it is not just a possibility, but rather a certainty. In other words, Kant argues that unless we are to deny the bindingness of the moral law altogether, we must posit the existence of the highest good.<sup>35</sup> But why should Kant be entitled to posit the reality of the highest good as opposed to just its possibility? Why isn't it enough for our practical reason to simply have the *hope* of working toward and achieving the highest good? Certainly this is enough in most other practical endeavors that we pursue. When I board the subway, I am never certain that it will get me to my destination on time, but I have a reasonable hope that it will, and this is generally sufficient to make my boarding of the train a rational action. Of course, if the tunnel is flooded, and I know that trains cannot pass, then my action becomes irrational. Why not, then, say the same thing with respect to the highest good? Why not simply say that we must have some reasonable hope of its achievement when we act morally? Indeed, this very concern was raised early on as an objection to Kant's theory by Theodore Wizenmann, who argued that Kant makes the mistake of confusing a wish or hope with something whose existence must be real. The highest good, as far as Wizenmann is concerned, remains a mere "wish," not a metaphysical certainty.<sup>36</sup>

35. See John R. Silber, "The Metaphysical Importance of the Highest Good as the Canon of Pure Reason in Kant's Philosophy," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 1 (1959): 233–244. Silber argues that "at its strongest, the argument is this: no rational man can will consistently in accord with the moral law of his rational nature unless he *wills* the realization of the highest good" (242). See also John R. Silber, "The Importance of the Highest Good in Kant's Ethics," *Ethics* 73, no. 3, (1961): 179–197.

36. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:143n.

In response to this objection, Kant explains that, while it is usually the case that a “mere wish” cannot bring something into being, in the case of moral reasoning, the concept of the highest good is more than a wish or a hope; it is a need arising from reason. Moral reasoning (based in pure practical reason) is thus importantly different from other kinds of practical reason in this respect. To see this difference between moral action and other kinds of action, it is helpful to return to our earlier example. When I board the subway, I need only have a reasonable hope that it will reach its destination in a timely manner. This is the case because, to use Kantian terminology, when we board a train, we are following a hypothetical imperative. There is no necessary and binding law that says we must board the train; our decision to board the train is based on a contingent end (say, to get to work or to earn a living). But when it comes to willing the moral law or willing an action that stems from the moral law, Kant thinks we are acting not out of inclination, but rather out of our recognition of a universally binding moral law. Merely hoping that our actions will have efficacy is not enough, in other words, when we have a *duty* to perform those actions. “The assumption” of the highest good, Kant says, “is as necessary as the moral law.”<sup>37</sup> It might be *irrational* to wait for a subway when we have no indication that one is coming, but it is actually *impossible* to will moral action without postulating the highest good.

In order to assess the structure of Kant's argument here, it is useful to analyze it using another fact that Kant postulates as a result of our recognition of the moral law—freedom of the will. Kant's claim is not that our recognition of the moral law's bindingness alerts us to the fact that we *might* be free; rather, it alerts us to the claim that we *are* free. And this is not just a rhetorical flourish on Kant's part. Indeed, he quite reason-

37. Ibid.

ably recognizes that there is something about moral action that necessarily implies human freedom. On one level, of course, we cannot act morally at all unless we assume we are free, or unless we act under the idea of freedom. But on a much more fundamental level, assuming that the actions that we undertake really are moral actions (that is, assuming that we are not fooling ourselves about the moral law's bindingness), then they are—by definition—actions undertaken by a free agent. There is, in short, something about the structure of moral action that requires the fact of human freedom.

One way of assessing Kant's response to Wizenmann, then, would be to ask whether something similar is true of the highest good. We might ask, in other words, whether there is something about the structure of moral action or choice that requires the fact of the highest good. It seems that the preceding discussion about the connection between humanity and happiness goes some way toward answering this question in the affirmative. When we act out of a recognition of the moral law, we are—by definition—acting in a way that will either preserve or promote a person's humanity. Given that humanity is, by definition, a capacity concerned with setting ends, we are at the same time acting in a way that will either preserve or promote a person's end-setting capacity, and often those ends themselves. There is a certain parallel between the postulate of freedom and the postulate of the highest good. In some sense, neither case has very much to do with what must be the case in order for our action to be *rational*. Rather, both have to do with what must be the case in order to act morally at all. And Kant's claim is that the highest good must result from moral action.

In addition, we are also perhaps led astray by thinking of Kant's claims about the highest good in terms that are too specific. In other words, if we automatically attribute to Kant the claim that the highest good must come about for any particular moral agent, or that it must come about in a person's lifetime,

then we are—quite rightly—led to be suspicious. I will examine these types of claims in more detail later, but for the time being, it is important to observe that, at its most fundamental level, Kant's claims about the necessity of the highest good are claims about how the universe must be “set up,” but not (necessarily) claims about how much happiness any individual can expect to experience. In this respect, then, we can also observe that the tendency to compare Kant's claims about the highest good to individual actions (e.g., the above subway example) is possibly framing the analogy in an inappropriate way to begin with. Kant's concern is not with whether moral action will bring about the highest good in any particular instance, but rather whether the laws of nature are set up in such a way to make happiness follow from virtue. His claim is a fundamental one about the relationship between virtue and happiness, not a claim about instances of virtue and instances of happiness. The more appropriate analogy, then, might be to ask whether a functioning subway system exists, not whether a train might come on some particular afternoon.

But even if Kant is at liberty to make these claims about the necessity of the highest good, we might still wonder about his move from practical knowledge to theoretical knowledge here. Kant's argument, again, is that based on the knowledge that we *ought* to obey the moral law, we can deduce that the highest good will *actually exist* or come about. We cannot, of course, have such knowledge directly through observation, but rather we have it indirectly, through a kind of transcendental argument about the facts that must be true in order for the moral law to be binding upon us. But perhaps Kant is not at liberty to make this transition from practical knowledge to theoretical knowledge. Perhaps one might object that the most Kant can say is that given the observation that we ought to follow the moral law, we can conclude that the highest good ought to exist. Such a claim would certainly echo Kant's claims (discussed in



more detail in what follows) that we have a *duty to bring about* the highest good.

Again, however, the parallel with the postulate of freedom is perhaps instructive in this case. Kant doesn't take the fact of obligation under the moral law to show that we *ought* to be free. Indeed, it is not even clear what this might mean. Rather, he takes our recognition of our obligation under the moral law to be evidence of the fact of our freedom. This is true because we could not even make sense of moral action without postulating the freedom of the will. I suspect that Kant thinks something is similar of postulating the highest good. We need some sort of guarantee that our moral actions—which, again, involve contributing to the ends that moral agents set—will be efficacious. Kant's point seems to be that we could not possibly act morally without such a guarantee about these facts about the world.

The foregoing discussion should not, in any case, be read as a definitive defense of Kant's claims about the necessity of certain theoretical facts about the world. However, I do take Kant's points to be more plausible that they are often given credit for being, primarily because it is all too easy to conflate Kant's claims about what must be possible for willing with his less than perfectly logical claims about the ultimate shape that the highest good must take. I submit that if we think of the concept of the highest good as intricately tied to the possibility of moral willing, in much the same way that human freedom is, then Kant's claims become more plausible. In any case, for the purposes of the argument that follows in this book, neither of Kant's strong claims will be necessary. For my argument and interpretation of Kant to succeed, one simply needs to accept that Kant thinks that the highest good is something that human beings are capable of working toward on earth. That is to say, one need only accept that the highest good is a possibility and that we do not require God's grace to achieve it. I argue for the latter of these claims in the next section of this chapter.

We have seen, then, that Kant's system is one in which virtue and happiness are not necessarily opposed to one another and, indeed, that there is reason to think that Kant is right when he says that the highest good is the necessary object of moral willing. But before we move on to see how Kant's account of the realization of the highest good develops, one more component of Kant's theory of the highest good is worth noting. This is Kant's repeated claim that we have a *duty to pursue* the highest good. For example, in the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant claims that "what belongs to duty here is only the striving to produce and promote the highest good in the world."<sup>38</sup> A few pages later, Kant reiterates this assertion, when he says that "the moral law commands me to make the highest possible good in a world the final object of all my conduct."<sup>39</sup>

What perhaps seems like an offhand remark actually poses some rather serious problems for Kant's argument. Again, Lewis White Beck picks up on these problems in his commentary. As he points out, the duty to pursue the highest good seems like a strange imperative if the highest good is understood simply as the state of affairs that results from acting out of respect for the moral law: "Suppose I do all in my power . . . to promote the highest good, what am I to do? Simply act out of respect for the moral law, which I already knew. . . . It is seriously misleading to say that there is command to seek the highest good which is different from the command to fulfill the requirements of morality."<sup>40</sup> In other words, even if we can make sense of Kant's introduction of the concept of the highest good, Kant is still confusing matters by insisting that we have an *obligation* to pursue this end. Unless we go about pursuing the highest good by changing our focus to happiness (something that Kant never suggests), Kant's introduction of this

38. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:126.

39. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:129.

40. Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, 244–45.

duty seems at best redundant. If we achieve the highest good by acting morally, then certainly Kant doesn't need to add any more obligations to the list that he has already introduced.

In response to this criticism, several authors have pointed out that Kant's claim that we have a duty to pursue the highest good does, in some sense, add something new to the Kantian description of what a moral life would look like. Specifically, Kant's claim tells us that we have an obligation to actively pursue the practical means necessary for bringing about the highest good. And this is not just a point about extending our conception of morality past the perfect duties we have to refrain from harming humanity. Rather, it is a point about finding the best means toward the highest good given the material circumstances we find ourselves in.

Put a different way, the list of duties that Kant provides, for example, in the *Groundwork* is a list that Kant derives by excluding information about practical anthropology from the investigation into the supreme principle of morality. This is as it should be, of course, since in order to find a necessary and universal principle of morality, we can rely only on pure practical reason. But when it comes to applying the moral law, we can—and ought to—refer to empirical facts about human action and psychology. Thus, as Stephen Engstrom argues, “although the moral law does not depend on material for its validity, it does depend on material for its employment.”<sup>41</sup> So, when Kant tells us that we have a duty to pursue the highest good, he is telling us that we have an obligation to discover which empirical facts

41. Stephen Engstrom, “The Concept of the Highest Good in Kant's Moral Theory,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, no. 4 (1992): 747–780, at 752. See also Silber, “The Importance of the Highest Good in Kant's Ethics,” 186: “In an act of volition, one does not simply will a good disposition. Rather one expresses a good disposition by willing something more concrete.” See also Allen Wood, who argues in *Kant's Moral Religion* that Kant's claim about having a duty to pursue the highest good also reflects Kant's insistence that reason always seeks an unconditioned totality (97–98).

are relevant to our bringing about this end, and then pursue the actions suggested by our investigation. The claim that we have a duty to pursue the highest good, then, *does* add something; it adds a claim about our obligation to discover and adopt the empirical means necessary to achieve the highest good.<sup>42</sup>

So, far from simply being a reassertion of the duties that we already have, Kant's claim that we have a duty to pursue the highest good actually gives us a great deal of insight into the specific kinds of duties that we, as agents in a material world, have. This fact, in turn, drives much of the discussion in this book. Kant's theory is not just one about the formal principles of which a moral individual must be ever mindful. It is also a theory about the specific obligations that we have once we take into account our obligation to bring about the highest good in conjunction with the empirical facts that surround our existence. Later in this book, I argue that some of these obligations include participating in social relationships and institutions that help us achieve this end. Specifically, I will argue that institutions such as education and public participation and relationships such as friendship ultimately bring us closer to achieving the highest good, and that we therefore have a kind of duty to participate in such institutions and relationships.

Of course, all of this assumes that there is something that we, as moral agents, can do to bring about the highest good in *this world*. But this is by no means a foregone conclusion within Kant's writing on the subject. Indeed, early in his writing on the highest good, Kant makes it clear that the highest good is something that we can hope to achieve only in the afterlife, perhaps by means of God's grace. If this were Kant's last word on the matter, it would be difficult to see how we could have any kind of obligation to pursue activities that might help bring

42. This idea of adding "material" or "content" to the formal law is also one that appears in Kant's discussion of ends that are also duties in the "Doctrine of Virtue."

about the highest good in this world. If, in other words, Kant's claims about the impossibility of achieving the highest good on this earth remained consistent throughout his writing, then Beck's criticisms of Kant's claims might in fact ring true.<sup>43</sup> But, as we will see, Kant's theory of the highest good (and specifically the details about when and how it can be achieved) undergo a change that, ultimately, allows for the above interpretation of Kant's claim that we have a duty to pursue the highest good. In the next section, I sketch the evolution of Kant's thought on the highest good, paying close attention to the aspects of the theory that change significantly over time.

*The Changing Shape of the Highest Good in  
Kant's Moral Philosophy*

Thus far, we have seen that Kant's concept of the highest good, or the object of moral action, is a central component of his moral theory. Further, we have seen that Kant makes several surprising claims about the object of moral action, not least of which is the claim that we have a duty to pursue the highest good. This is especially baffling if we consider Kant's other claims regarding the highest good—specifically that, given our human limitations, the highest good is a state of affairs that can be hoped for only in the afterlife. Put briefly, Kant's two claims are at odds with one another. Kant cannot coherently claim that we have a duty to work toward a goal that is out of our control. And if Kant's account of the highest good in the *Critique of Practical Reason* were in fact his last word on how we can expect to accomplish this end, we would be right to question his assertion that we have a duty to work toward the highest

43. And, as I point out below, Beck's criticism of Kant appears in his commentary on the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Because Kant argues there that the highest good cannot be achieved on this earth, Beck's worries seem warranted in that context.

good that consists of something more than simply abiding by the categorical imperative. But in this section I will argue that Kant's account of the highest good in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is not, in fact, his most developed and consistent view of the highest good. Instead, I will argue, Kant's views about the highest good—specifically with respect to how it is to be accomplished and the extent to which we have any efficacy over this accomplishment—change over the course of his writing.<sup>44</sup> In what follows, I present three different “phases” of Kant's work that demonstrate a shift in Kant's view of the highest good. In the first section, I present an overview and example of Kant's early views on the highest good. In the second, I present some evidence that Kant's view went through a transition of sorts with respect to some of the fundamental assumptions and claims related to the highest good. Finally, in the third section, I present what I take to be Kant's most developed and consistent account of the highest good.

By way of preview, there will be several aspects of Kant's thought on the highest good that I will pay special attention to in this section. Each of these aspects, I will argue, undergoes a change over the course of Kant's writing on the highest good. The first feature of Kant's theory of the highest good that appears to undergo a change is his view on the crucial question of where and when the highest good is to be achieved. In his earlier thought, Kant describes the highest good as something that cannot be achieved on this earth, but whose accomplishment must instead be delayed until the afterlife. This “theological” account of the highest good is particularly apparent in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, though, as we will see, versions

44. This claim is by no means original to me. Several others, including Stephen Engstrom, Paul Guyer, and Andrews Reath, have advanced this view. In this section I present this view as an important prelude to what follows, namely, the claim that because the highest good is achievable on this earth, we have an obligation to participate in various social institutions that help bring about the highest good more effectively.

of it appear even later, for example in Kant's essay on "Theory and Practice."<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Kant sometimes describes the highest good as something that can be achieved on earth. This is an account that appears especially in the *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. I will argue that the most mature form of Kant's thought on this question is that the highest good is a secular goal.<sup>46</sup> That is, even though it may be a nearly impossible goal to achieve, the highest good is a goal that can and should be achieved on earth, not in an afterlife.<sup>47</sup>

The second feature of Kant's thought on the highest good that appears to undergo a distinct revision concerns his views on who can expect to enjoy the highest good. In earlier accounts of the highest good, Kant suggests that the enjoyment of happiness associated with the highest good is one that stands in direct relation to an individual's own virtue. On such a view, each person is compensated for his or her own virtue. There is, so to speak, no "shared account" of virtue and happiness that eventually becomes balanced. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, for example, one of Kant's reasons for insisting that the highest good is a goal that can be achieved only in an afterlife is that it is simply impossible for any individual to achieve perfect

45. I take the "theological" vs. "secular" terminology from Andrews Reath. See Andrews Reath, "Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26, no. 4 (1988): 593–619.

46. See for example, Engstrom, "The Concept of the Highest Good in Kant's Moral Theory"; Guyer, "Ends of Reason and Ends of Nature: The Place of Teleology in Kant's Ethics"; Reath, "Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant"; and Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion*.

47. Closely related to Kant's shifting views about the possibility of achieving the highest good on this earth are his shifting views about the role and status of inclination. In earlier works Kant sometimes suggests that inclinations are the source of moral evil, and therefore that they must be denied or resisted. This, in turn, seems to be an impossible, or nearly impossible, feat for any embodied human to accomplish. However, in later works, Kant revised his position on the inclinations in an important respect. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, for example, Kant even goes so far as to suggest that inclinations give us the material with which we can undertake moral action.

virtue in this life. And even if such perfect virtue were possible, Kant argues, the empirical facts of this world suggest to us that there is no guarantee that any individual would receive the happiness he or she deserves. However, in later accounts of the highest good, Kant revises his insistence on this individualistic account, suggesting instead that the enjoyment of the highest good is something that can be shared by a community of agents. Indeed, if we understand this community as one that extends over the course of many generations, we can come to see our progress toward the highest good as a project that extends throughout history.

Finally, both of these changes suggest that Kant undergoes a shift in his thinking about God's role with respect to bringing about the highest good. To be clear, however, I do not intend to make the claim that Kant shifts to a *wholly* secular view in the course of his writing. In all of his writings on the highest good, Kant consistently argues that we must posit the existence of God as the *author of laws of nature* that make the concurrence of virtue and happiness possible. However, even if God's role as the author of laws of nature remains consistent over the course of Kant's writing, the laws of which he is an author do seem to undergo some revision. In the earlier accounts, God is the author of laws that allow happiness to be distributed according to an individual's virtue in an afterlife. Thus, progress toward the highest good is an obscure and perhaps mysterious one for agents. Though the practical use of reason allows them to postulate the immortality of the soul and God's existence as the author of laws of nature as conditions for the achievement of the highest good, their point of view is one that reveals only "an endless series" of the whole, while "God alone can survey" the ultimate connection between virtue and happiness.<sup>48</sup> As a result, in many of Kant's more theological accounts of the high-

48. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:123–124.



est good, the happiness that comprises part of the highest good is described almost as a kind of "reward" for virtue. Agents do not know how such happiness comes about; they can only have faith that God will reward their virtue with happiness in the afterlife.

In later accounts of the highest good, however, the laws of nature that link virtue and happiness are decidedly less mysterious to moral agents. This transparency results from the fact that, according to these accounts, shared happiness is essentially the systematic result of the actions of a community of moral agents who respect the ends that others set for themselves. In other words, the fact that—for the most part—agents in an ideal moral community are happy can be explained by the fact that agents in a moral community respect each others' ends and try to promote the ends of others as far as this is possible and consistent with the dictates of the moral law. And with the mystery of achieving the highest good thus removed, those agents are able to pursue activities that help bring about the highest good on earth. Some of those activities, of course, comprise the discussion in the latter half of this book.

*Kant's Early View: Theological and Individual*

Kant's first discussion of the highest good appears in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in the second section of the Canon of Pure Reason, where Kant sets out to discover whether "pure reason is also to be found in practical use."<sup>49</sup> It is here that Kant summarizes the "interest of reason" into three oft-cited questions: "(1) What can I know? (2) What should I do? (3) What may I hope?"<sup>50</sup> The first of these questions, of course, is a question about speculative reason. The second and third, however, are questions that deal with practical reason. The second is a

49. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), AkA804/B832.

50. Ibid., AkA805/B833.

direct question about what the moral law requires of us. The third, however, is not simply a question about the moral law, or about the use of practical reason alone. Rather, Kant explains, it is a question that combines the interests of practical and the-oretical reason. It is a question about the highest good.

Kant begins his argument in the first *Critique* from the premise that we are bound by the moral law and aware of this bindingness. So, he says, "I assume that there are really pure moral laws . . . and that these laws command absolutely."<sup>51</sup> Kant's next move is to argue from this awareness of obligation or duty to the conclusion that we can obey it. But from the premises that we have an obligation to be morally worthy (and thus worthy of happiness) and that ought implies can, we seem to arrive only at the conclusion that we have the ability to be worthy of happiness. This, however, seems to say nothing about actually receiving the happiness that we are worthy of—unless, of course, worthiness to be happy can somehow have a causal relationship with happiness itself. Kant has just such a relationship in mind. A few paragraphs later, he talks about the "systematic unity" of our choices with the freedom of others. In other words, to be worthy of happiness is just to live in such a systematic unity with others. In the first *Critique*, Kant calls this systematic unity the "moral world," or "the world as it would be if it were in conformity with all moral laws."<sup>52</sup>

Kant's reference to a "systematic unity" and to a "moral world" suggests, at first glance, a kind of secular interpretation of the highest good. And, in fact, other suggestions of the secular interpretation appear relatively early on in the discussion, for example, when Kant describes the moral world as something "which could be encountered in the history of humankind"<sup>53</sup> and, in the next paragraph, as a world that is, *thus*

51. Ibid., Ak A807/B835.

52. Ibid., Ak A808/B836.

53. Ibid., Ak A807/B835.

far, merely an intelligible world.<sup>54</sup> The suggestion, of course, seems to be that the moral world is one that could exist, even if our progress toward it has been thwarted until now.

Elsewhere, however, Kant is not so optimistic. He explains that “this system of self-rewarding morality is only an idea” and goes on to say that such a world is “only an intelligible world, since the sensible world does not promise us that sort of systematic unity of ends, the reality of which can be grounded on nothing other than the presupposition of a highest original good [God].”<sup>55</sup> But even this pair of statements seems inconsistent—in the first place, Kant suggests a more systematic approach or explanation of the highest good. His claim that morality is “self-rewarding” seems to suggest that happiness naturally and systematically results from virtue. But, the claim that immediately follows—that this world promises no such “systematic unity of ends”—suggests that Kant is not altogether optimistic about the possibility of such a system. In the end, Kant himself may be conflicted about the answer to this question in the *Critique of Pure Reason*; he ultimately argues that we need God to correlate moral action immediately with happiness, whether the highest good is achieved in “this or another life.”<sup>56</sup>

While Kant perhaps leaves the precise interpretation of the highest good ambiguous in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, this is not the case in his second *Critique*, the *Critique of Practical Reason*. There, Kant devotes significant time to the idea of the highest good, and leaves little question about how the highest good is to be achieved. Kant's account of the highest good in the second *Critique* is undoubtedly a theological one, in which *both* perfect

54. Ibid., Ak A808/B836, my emphasis.

55. Ibid., Ak A814/B842.

56. Ibid., Ak. A813/841. Of course, even this rather diplomatic assertion of how the highest good is to be achieved may not be so diplomatic after all. The “other life” Kant refers to may, after all, be another (future) person's life, suggesting an interpretation of the highest good that has our progress toward its accomplishment extending over the course of history.

virtue and its attendant happiness are achieved only in the afterlife. As a result, it seems, the account in the second *Critique* is one that puts happiness in a reward-like relationship with virtue, rather than casting it as the systematic result of virtue.

Kant's discussion of the highest good in the second *Critique* takes up—in some form or another—almost all of Book 2 of the Doctrine of Elements (the Dialectic). Much of Kant's detailed discussion of the concept of the highest good appears for the first time here. Kant begins the discussion with his argument—presented in the previous section of this chapter—that practical reason requires an object and that this object is an “unconditioned totality,” the greatest possible happiness consistent with the greatest possible virtue.<sup>57</sup> Kant continues with his analysis of this relationship, arguing, against the Stoics and Epicureans, that virtue and happiness are not identical.<sup>58</sup> Rather, one must be the cause of the other, and since “maxims that put the determining ground of the will in the desire for one's happiness are not moral at all,” happiness cannot be the cause of virtue.<sup>59</sup> We are left with only one remaining option—virtue must, in some sense or another, be the “cause” of happiness. This assertion, then, is where the discussion of the highest good that is particular to the second *Critique* begins.

Kant accepts the conclusion with which his argument thus far has left him, but he observes that there is “no necessary connection of happiness with virtue in the world, adequate to the highest good.”<sup>60</sup> True, happiness may come to virtuous individuals from time to time, but a cursory observation of the world shows that happiness does not follow virtue with the necessity required by the concept of the highest good. What is perhaps Kant's most poetic statement of this worry actually appears in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, where he observes

57. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:108.

58. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:111.

60. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:113.

that nature seems almost to thwart our quest for happiness. Humans are not nature's "special favorite"; rather they are "spared just as little from [nature's] destructive effects" such as disease and disaster as any other creature.<sup>61</sup> And, in a moment of marked pessimism, Kant observes that

deceit, violence and envy will always surround him [mankind], even though he is himself honest, peaceable, and benevolent; and the righteous ones besides himself that he will encounter will, in spite of all their worthiness to be happy, nevertheless be subject by nature, which pays no attention to that, to all the evils of poverty, illnesses, and untimely death, just like all the other animals on earth, and will always remain thus until one wide grave engulfs them all together (whether honest or dishonest, in makes no difference here) and flings them . . . back into the abyss of the purposeless chaos from which they were drawn.<sup>62</sup>

Kant is thus left with an apparent contradiction (or antinomy) between the conclusion of his argument about the object of practical reason and empirical observation of the world. And he can no more easily jettison his argument about the highest good than he can ignore what empirical observation of the world tells him, since (he claims) his conclusion about the highest good follows a priori from the fact of the moral law,

61. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Ak 5:430. See also 5:458. "As soon as human beings began to reflect on right and wrong, at a time when they still indifferently overlooked the purposiveness of nature, taking advantage of it without thinking that to be anything more than the usual course of nature, the judgment must have occurred to them that it could not in the end make no difference if a person has conducted himself honestly or falsely, fairly or violently, even if to the end of his life has found at least no visible reward for his virtue or punishment for his crimes. It is as if they heard an inner voice that things must come out differently; hence there must have lain hidden in them the representation, even if obscure, of something they felt themselves obligated to strive for which would not be compatible with such an outcome, or which, if they regarded the ordinary course of the world as the only order of things, they did not in turn know how to reconcile it with that inner vocation of their mind."

62. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:452.

and to abandon the highest good would mean to conclude that “the moral law, which commands us to promote [the highest good] must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false.”<sup>63</sup> In addition to the overwhelming evidence against the idea of virtue causing happiness, Kant also thinks we are faced with another obstacle to achieving the highest good. This second conflict arises from the fact that—as Kant at least asserts here—*perfect virtue* is not achievable in the sensible world. He claims: “Complete conformity of the will with the moral law is, however, *holiness*, a perfection of which no rational being of the sensible world is capable at any moment of his existence.”<sup>64</sup> In this passage, Kant does not supply an argument for his claim, but several key phrases in his sentence suggest that Kant’s pessimism about the possibility of perfect virtue is based not on empirical observation alone, but at least in part on the very nature of agents whose rational will is located in a sensible person. First, there is Kant’s contrast between rational, yet sensible, beings and the state of holiness. For Kant, a holy will is a rational will that lacks sensible inclination. Because it is rational, a holy will (like God’s) is bound by the moral law. But, unlike sensible creatures, a holy will is not *obligated* by the moral law because, in order to feel obligation, a will must also feel the pull of inclination. Obligation is, in other words, what sensible creatures with inclinations feel when they realize that they must limit their pursuit of inclination out of a recognition of the moral law.<sup>65</sup> Kant’s reference to holiness in this passage suggests that it is not just bad fortune that has kept us from attaining perfect virtue, but rather that the source of our problem is our very nature as sensible beings. Kant’s claim that this perfection is something that no person is capable of “*at any moment* of his

63. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:114.

64. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:122.

65. See, for example, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:439.

existence" (my emphasis) also supports this claim. Certainly, we might think, there might have been moments (even if fleeting) in which individuals have managed to achieve perfect virtue. The fact that Kant thinks this is something that no person is capable of—even for a moment—suggests that the source of the problem lies in our nature as sensible beings. This is an important fact to keep in mind, since Kant's resolution to this problem will be to postulate an afterlife in which we are able to work toward perfect virtue. But this solution raises just as many problems as it is intended to solve.

In sum, then, Kant is left with two antinomies to resolve. The first part of each conflict is the same—our practical reason has given us an *a priori* assurance of the object of morality, or the highest good. But in the first case, we see an apparent contradiction that stems from the impossibility of perfect virtue (the first "half" of the highest good). And in the second case, we see an apparent contradiction that stems from the apparent lack of correlation between virtue and happiness (the second "half" of the highest good). To resolve the first antinomy Kant postulates that moral perfection "can only be found in an *endless progress* toward that complete conformity [to the moral law]." This endless progress, of course, assumes some kind of endless existence, and thus Kant posits the immortality of the soul as a necessary condition for the accomplishment of the highest good.

But in positing the immortality of the soul as a condition for the achievement of perfect virtue, Kant may have inadvertently created a new hurdle for the achievement of the highest good. If we assume that the afterlife that Kant has in mind is an immaterial one, it certainly bears little resemblance to the sensible world we currently inhabit. Specifically, the afterlife in which we are to pursue perfect virtue is one in which agents will no longer be setting and pursuing material ends. And if the afterlife in which we are to become perfectly virtuous is in fact immaterial, then it becomes difficult to imagine how it could accommodate

either part of the highest good. Both virtue and happiness become difficult to accomplish in an immaterial world.

This is perhaps easiest to see when it comes to the second part of the equation that comprises the highest good—that of happiness. After all, as Kant seems to understand the term, we are happy when some of our sensible ends are fulfilled. What it would mean for a person to achieve happiness in an immaterial afterlife becomes a puzzling question, since happiness seems to be something that is inextricably tied to our phenomenal selves. As T. M. Greene puts the criticism, Kant cannot make the claim that the “phenomenal self will continue after death or that in the next life man will continue to desire the happiness which he craves in this.”<sup>66</sup>

For the same reasons, it becomes difficult to see how a person could achieve perfect virtue in any meaningful way in an immaterial afterlife. To be sure, phenomenal experience isn't a necessary prerequisite for virtue on the Kantian account; Kant's references to holy wills serves as evidence of this fact. On the other hand, the way in which we (as non-holy wills) express our virtue seems to depend on our nature as embodied creatures. So, for example, in the *Religion*, Kant observes that our inclinations actually “give the occasion for what the moral disposition can demonstrate in its power, for virtue.”<sup>67</sup>

66. T. M. Greene, quoted in Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion*, 132.

67. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Ak 6:35. Allen Wood, in *Kant's Moral Religion*, presents a possible solution to this apparent problem by pointing out that claims about the absence of sensibility in the afterlife cannot be sufficiently supported, given Kant's claims about the limits of our knowledge: “Kant does maintain, of course, that man's desire for happiness is due to man's finitude and is related to sensibility in this life. But if he (or Greene) were to claim that happiness is *not* a part of a future life, he would be making a claim to theoretical knowledge of transcendent existence, a claim which can never be made good” (132). Wood makes an important observation here, but it is also worth pointing out that Kant seems to not have shared this idea about the limitations of our knowledge with respect to divine and holy wills. He claims that they do not fall prey to the “subjective imperfection of the will” (*Groundwork*, Ak 4:414). And while Kant's remarks about “holy wills” might easily be read as



Furthermore, we might also ask ourselves whether Kant's postulate of immortality solves the problem it is initially meant to solve if we can hope only for an "endless progress" toward virtue. After all, our reason demands that if we accept the bindingness of the moral law, then we must accept that the achievement of the highest good is possible. But if we can find an "endless progress" toward virtue "only" in the afterlife, then the achievement of the highest good seems just as unlikely in the afterlife as it does in this life.<sup>68</sup>

In any case, with the first postulate, Kant takes himself to have solved the first barrier to achieving the highest good. But the problem that worried Kant at the outset of his discussion in the second *Critique* still remains: how are we to achieve the highest good when the sensible world and the laws of nature that govern it do not seem to suggest any connection between virtue and happiness? As Kant argues, "there is not the least ground in the moral law for a necessary connection between the morality and the proportionate happiness of a being belonging to the world as part of it."<sup>69</sup> In order to resolve this antinomy, Kant introduces the postulate of the existence of God as the author of the laws of nature. He explains that we must postulate

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claims about theoretical placeholders (as opposed to existing entities), the same cannot be said of his remarks about the divine will.

68. Again, Wood presents some possible solutions to this problem (see *Kant's Moral Religion*, 120–121). First, Wood observes, it might be useful to think of this progress as achieving a kind of character or disposition, rather than perfecting one's choices or actions. Even so, he acknowledges that this doesn't seem to solve the problem: "For if the endless progress itself does not include holiness as any part of it, then neither is the disposition to progress (supersensible though it may be) in any way identical with holiness of the will. In either case, then, Kant cannot claim that holiness of will is actually attained as part of this infinite progression; rather he seems to be claiming that this progression [is] regarded by God as in some sense morally equivalent to holiness. . . . [But Kant] must also indicate how this progression . . . can count for the attainment of holiness" (121). Wood ultimately appeals to Kant's discussion of grace in the *Religion* to solve this problem. Below, in the section on radical evil, I discuss my doubts about such appeals to grace.

69. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:124.

“a cause of all nature, distinct from nature, which contains the ground of this connection, namely of the exact correspondence of happiness with morality.”<sup>70</sup>

The first thing to note about the second postulate is Kant's assumption that happiness will be distributed in proportion to an individual's virtue. That is, rather than arguing that communities will enjoy a kind of shared happiness that results directly from their virtue, Kant suggests here that individual agents will enjoy a happiness that corresponds to their specific virtue. So, for example, in the passage above, Kant mentions the “exact correspondence” between virtue and happiness. A few paragraphs later, he explains that “the greatest happiness is represented as connected in the most exact proportion with the greatest degree of moral perfection.”<sup>71</sup> And though these passages leave open the possibility that Kant could be talking about the exact proportion between *shared* virtue and *shared* happiness, his use of the singular in the discussion seems to close the case. In another passage, for example, Kant's concern is with the “necessary connection between the morality and the proportionate happiness of *a being* belonging to the world.”<sup>72</sup>

Kant thus postulates the existence of God, as “a cause of all nature, distinct from nature” in order to ensure the correspondence between virtue and happiness that the concept of the highest good requires. As noted above, the postulate of God as the author of the laws of nature that allow for the correspondence between virtue and happiness is a relatively consistent feature of Kant's description of the highest good. Still, in the context of the discussion in the second *Critique*, we might ask just how such laws of nature are intended to operate. Is it the case, for example, that these laws of nature are such that they operate equally in the sensible and immaterial worlds? If so, it seems it must *just* be our inability to achieve perfect virtue that

70. Ibid., Ak 5:125.

71. Ibid., Ak 5:129–130.

72. Ibid., Ak 5:124, my emphasis.

stands in the way of accomplishing the highest good. But this, too, seems a strange conclusion, given facts stemming from empirical observation and Kant's insistence that happiness will correspond to individual virtue. Certainly, even if no person has achieved perfect virtue, we can easily imagine a perfectly virtuous person being denied happiness in this world. So perhaps the "laws of nature" of which Kant's postulated God is an author apply primarily (or only) to the already postulated afterlife. There is nothing, strictly speaking, wrong or contradictory about such an account, but it does suggest an account of the laws of nature in which the mechanism that connects happiness to virtue remains obscure to us. This fact, in conjunction with Kant's insistence that happiness will be distributed in accord with an individual's virtue, suggests that, in this work, Kant thinks of happiness as a kind of reward for which we are entitled to hope, but toward which we can take no action, beyond simply being as moral as possible.

It is worth pausing at this point to return to Lewis White Beck's point—raised earlier—that the concept of the highest good is misleading, since it doesn't actually add anything to Kant's moral theory. According to Beck, to say that we have a duty to pursue the highest good and to say that we have a duty to follow the moral law amount to the very same thing. Though, in general, I disagree with Beck's argument about Kant's claim, his argument appears in his commentary on the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and in this context, I think, it is easier to see the force of Beck's objection. In the second *Critique*, Kant insists that perfect virtue is impossible in this world, and he assumes that the highest good must be achieved on an individual basis. These claims, I have argued, make the "laws of nature" that God is the author of mysterious and inaccessible to us. They are certainly not the kind of laws that we can understand and make use of in order to more quickly bring about the highest good. Indeed, in the second *Critique*, all that is left to us is to strive to

be as morally good as possible and have faith in our ultimate achievement of the highest good. Thus Beck's complaint that the duty to pursue the highest good contributes nothing seems, here at least, to ring true. Nevertheless, in later accounts, Kant abandons this account of the role of God and avoids the criticism that Beck makes.

Indeed, Kant is wise to abandon much of his early account of the highest good in favor of what, we will see, is a more reasonable one, since the account in the second *Critique* is riddled with problems from the outset. First, Kant is not justified in making the claim that this object of moral action must be *individual* reward for *individual* virtue. Of course, on the one hand, we can perhaps have some initial sympathy for this view. After all, it doesn't seem like Kant's God would be one that is indifferent to the moral strivings of an individual. How, in other words, could a just and benevolent deity possibly dole out a lifetime of misery as a reward for a lifetime of moral virtue (or near moral virtue)? As Frederick Beiser eloquently puts it, "The underlying rationale for this intuition . . . is nothing less than a principle of distributive justice. Rewards should be in proportion to merit." Beiser continues to add that this "imperative of justice—the demand that the world itself be fair" is the point on which Kant differs most clearly from his Stoic and Epicurean predecessors.<sup>73</sup>

But here, it is important to remember that Kant does not initially approach the question of the highest good from the perspective of what kind of reward a morally good person *deserves*, or how a benevolent deity would behave. Indeed, to some extent, both of these questions are beyond the scope of what Kant's theoretical or practical philosophy is able to answer. Rather, Kant's investigation into the highest good begins with

73. Frederick C. Beiser, "Moral Faith and the Highest Good," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 588–629, at 597.

a question of what must be true if we recognize the moral law as one that addresses and binds all rational wills. This is the question that Kant's practical philosophy *can* answer. And what follows from the fact that the moral law binds rational end-setting wills is that a certain degree of end-fulfillment (happiness) should follow from moral action. Put another way, Kant's claim cannot be that we *cannot possibly will the moral law* if we aren't assured of being rewarded for our own virtue. Individual agents do this all the time, and formulating Kant's claim this way makes it sound almost as implausible as his critics say it is. Indeed, it may be Kant's initial insistence on this one-to-one correspondence that leads some of his critics to think that he is making the rather obvious mistake of mixing inclination and sensibility into the ground of morality. Thus, in the essay on "Theory and Practice," Kant responds to Christian Garve's charge that Kant has, with the concept of the highest good, abandoned the purity of the moral law. Garve's worry seems to be that if we act with the knowledge that we will receive *our own* happiness for *our own* virtue, then Kant's idea of the highest good seems at risk of becoming heteronomous. But, in a footnote, Kant replies that this is the wrong way to think about the relationship between virtue and happiness in the highest good. While Kant still insists that the highest good is a "proportion between [happiness] and the worthiness of a *subject*," he also insists that when a person thinks of the incentive involved in the highest good, it is "not his own happiness thereby intended but only the idea as an end in itself."<sup>74</sup>

Instead, Kant's claim in the argument for the highest good is that we cannot possibly will the moral law if we aren't assured that *some happiness will follow from it*, or that it will be efficacious. We need to know, in other words, that our virtue is, in the grand scheme of things, contributing to a more perfect, happier world.

74. Kant, "On the Common Saying," Ak. 8:280n, my emphasis.

Second, Kant is not justified in making the claims (crucial to his argument) that perfect virtue and the happiness consistent with this virtue are impossible in this world. Recall that Kant uses these claims to argue for the postulates of immortality and God, respectively. But it is clear that in the first case, Kant's insistence on the impossibility of virtue probably rests on the assumption on his part that no embodied, sensible will could ever be perfectly virtuous. This is a claim that Kant is not entitled to, and it is one that he seems to abandon in later works. In the second case, Kant's claim that the happiness that corresponds to perfect virtue is impossible is based partly on his assumption that each individual must receive the happiness that she deserves, and partly on a faulty empirical claim that happiness—though unlikely—is impossible.

*Signs of a Transition in Kant's Thought on the Highest Good*

Kant's discussion of the highest good in the essay "On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory but Is of No Use in Practice" begins with the previously quoted response to Christian Garve's objection that Kant's theory of the highest good pollutes what is meant to be a moral philosophy grounded in reason alone. Garve argues that to inject a discussion of happiness, even within the context of the highest good, is to inject inclination into the very foundations of moral philosophy. As Kant restates the objection, Garve insists that "observance of the moral law, without any regard for human happiness at all, [must be] the *sole final end* for the human being."<sup>75</sup> Kant replies that this is a serious misunderstanding of his moral theory. While it is true that morality cannot be grounded on the ends that we seek, this very fact "*introduces* another end for the human being's will, namely to work to the best of one's ability toward the *highest good* possible in the world."<sup>76</sup> In its description

75. "Theory and Practice," Ak. 8:279.

76. Ibid.

of the conceptual foundations of the highest good, Kant's assertion here is similar to his argument in the second *Critique*. For example, in the detailed footnote that accompanies his reply to Garve, Kant repeats the assertion that we must assume the existence of the highest good, for "without some end there can be no *will*" and "the need for a final end assigned by pure reason and comprehending the whole of all ends under one principle (a world as the highest good and possible through our cooperation) is a need of an unselfish will *extending* itself beyond possible observance of the formal law to production of an object (the highest good)."<sup>77</sup>

But while the basic argument supporting Kant's claims about the existence of the highest good is similar to the argument in the second *Critique*, in the essay on "Theory and Practice," we begin to see some revision in Kant's thought about how and when the highest good is to be realized. First, there is a major shift in Kant's thinking when it comes to the possibility of perfect virtue in this world. Recall that in the second *Critique*, Kant postulates the immortality of the soul and the existence of God because of what he sees as two unfortunate facts about human existence. First Kant assumes that, as sensible creatures, we are incapable of achieving moral perfection in this world; this is his reason for postulating the immortality of the soul. Second, he thinks, without the postulate of an author of the laws of nature, we could never be assured that happiness would follow from virtue. In "Theory and Practice," however, Kant changes his argument and asserts, instead, that we *do* have the ability to achieve moral perfection, but that the problem of distributing happiness in accord with virtue remains. The object of the highest good, he argues, is "in our control from one quarter, but not from both taken together."<sup>78</sup>

77. Ibid., Ak. 8:279–280n.

78. Ibid., Ak. 8:279.

Kant's shift in his position about the possibility of virtue has major implications for how we conceive of the possibility of realizing the highest good. After all, it was the impossibility of virtue that led Kant to the postulate of the afterlife in the second *Critique*. Now that this complication has been removed from Kant's argument, it seems we are free to think of the highest good as something that can be realized here on earth, perhaps over the course of generations, but nevertheless according to a "secular" conception of the highest good. And, indeed, Kant makes several suggestions to this effect. So, for example, in the same passage, Kant claims that we have an obligation "to work to the best of [our] ability toward the highest good possible *in the world*."<sup>79</sup> Kant continues by echoing his earlier assertion that we cannot will virtuous action without posting the highest good, by claiming that "a world as the highest good and possible through our cooperation . . . is a need of an unselfish will."<sup>80</sup> Both of these references to bringing about a world in which the highest good is realized seem indicative of a shift toward a more secular conception. Furthermore, Kant's claim that the achievement of the highest good might be possible through our *cooperation* suggests that the highest good is something that we can work toward together on this earth.

However, to say that Kant has shifted entirely to a secular conception would be speaking too soon, for even in the essay on "Theory and Practice" Kant still retains some of his old thinking about the necessity of an afterlife. Interestingly, he now supplies a different reason for such a need. After he argues that the highest good is "within our control from one quarter, but not from both taken together," he continues to argue that we must therefore postulate, "for practical purposes," both "a moral ruler of the world [and a] *future life*."<sup>81</sup> So it seems now

79. *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

80. *Ibid.*, Ak. 8:280n.

81. *Ibid.*, Ak. 8:279, my emphasis.



that Kant thinks we need to postulate the existence of an afterlife not for the purpose of striving toward perfect virtue, but rather for the purpose of distributing happiness according to virtue.

Of course, Kant's reference to a "future life" may not be a theological claim at all. Perhaps, that is, this "future life" is not our future life in another world, but rather the future life of our descendants. There is some support for this reading in the "Theory and Practice" essay in Kant's discussion of progress in the human race that comes as a response to Moses Mendelssohn's assertion that it is "a fantasy that the whole, humanity here below, should in the course of time always move forward and perfect itself."<sup>82</sup> In response, Kant argues that to think of humanity as merely making sporadic steps toward virtue "and soon after falling back just as deeply into vice and misery" runs "contrary to the morality of a wise creator and ruler of the world."<sup>83</sup> He continues:

I shall therefore be allowed to assume that, since the human race is constantly advancing with respect to culture (as its natural end) it is also to be conceived as progressing toward what is better with respect to the moral end of its existence, and that this will indeed be *interrupted* from time to time but will never be *broken off*. I do not need to prove this presupposition; it is up to its adversary to prove [his] case. For I rest my case on my innate duty, the duty of every member of the series of generations . . . so to influence posterity that it becomes always better (the possibility of this must, accordingly, also be assumed), and to do it in such a way that this duty may be legitimately handed down from one member [in the series of] generations to another.<sup>84</sup>

This passage is noteworthy not only in Kant's suggestion that progress can—and probably will—occur over the course of many generations, but also in Kant's claim that his "case" for

82. Ibid., Ak. 8:307.

83. Ibid., Ak. 8:308.

84. Ibid.

such progress rests on a recognition of our “innate duty.” In other words, Kant’s argument for progress over the course of generations mirrors the arguments for the postulates in the second *Critique*. We know that we have a duty to “influence posterity [so] that it becomes ever better,” so we must presuppose the possibility of such progress. To be clear, it does not yet seem that Kant is making the claim in the essay on “Theory and Practice” that such intergenerational progress can actually take the place of an afterlife. Nor does Kant seem to be making the stronger claim that moral perfection and the happiness consistent with it are guaranteed outcomes over the course of these many generations; here he clearly uses the language of possibility. Nevertheless, he is clearly willing to accept the idea that there can be moral progress in history, and this, I argue, signals the beginnings of a shift in his thought about how virtue and happiness are ultimately to be combined.

Still, while Kant’s faith in progress in history may lend some support to the “secular” and intergenerational interpretation of his claim about the necessity of a “future life,” there is also evidence to suggest that Kant has not yet made the transition to the secular account found in the *Religion*, and, instead, has in mind an afterlife when he refers to this “future life.” If we were to assume that Kant’s claims about progress in history suggest a secular account, we would probably also have to accept that he has, in the essay on “Theory and Practice,” changed his mind about the manner in which happiness is distributed. Specifically, he would have had to have changed his conception to one in which humankind shares the happiness that results from virtue. But there is evidence that Kant has not yet adopted this “shared” view. Kant is at great pains in “Theory and Practice” to argue that his concept of the highest good does not introduce an element of self-love or selfishness into his moral theory. So, even though the highest good is a relationship between the virtue and happiness of “a subject,” he insists that

such happiness does not serve as an incentive for that subject.<sup>85</sup> If, on the other hand, Kant were fully embracing the “shared” account that his remark on history suggests, the worry about selfishness would seem out of place. If the happiness that makes up part of the highest good might never come to *me*, but only to my community members, or even my descendants, then it hardly seems as though that happiness could serve as a reliable incentive for action (unless, of course, we posit a very deep kind of conjugal affection for others, evidence of which appears nowhere in the “Theory and Practice” essay).

Still, it seems clear that the essay on “Theory and Practice” evinces a shift in Kant’s thinking. He has abandoned the idea that virtue is impossible in this world—a major hurdle for any secular account of the highest good. And his claim that happiness is impossible seems to stem from his insistence on an individualistic account of how happiness follows from virtue. In a sense, the only revision to the account in “Theory and Practice” that is needed to allow Kant to have a purely secular view is a revision of this very claim. And this is precisely the revision he makes by the time he writes his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.

*The “Secular” Account: An Ethical Community  
as the Highest Good*

By the time he writes the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant’s conception of the highest good has changed significantly since the earlier accounts examined above. Rather than a state that can only be achieved in an afterlife, with God’s help, the highest good is here sketched as a state of this world that we can and ought to work toward over the course of human history. And, rather than a state of affairs in which happiness is apportioned in exact proportion to an individual’s virtue, the

85. “Theory and Practice,” Ak. 8:28on.

highest good is a state of affairs in which the maximum general happiness consistent with virtue follows from maximal overall virtue. Kant's description of the ethical community in the *Religion* is thus a description of a secular and shared goal. So, while it may be the case that an individual might not experience the most happiness consistent with her own virtue, perhaps because of bad luck, it will nevertheless remain the case that, when it comes to the community of agents, the highest degree of happiness consistent with the highest degree of virtue will obtain. And, furthermore, this conjunction of virtue and happiness is hardly an accidental occurrence. Rather, it is precisely because individuals are virtuous—that they respect others' ends so far as this is consistent with the moral law—that people are, on the whole, happy. Thus, we see in the *Religion* the culmination of Kant's changing thought on the highest good. In its final form, the highest good is not an otherworldly prize to hope for. It is the world that obtains when each person follows the moral law, and it is a world that individuals have an obligation to work to achieve.

Kant's first mention of the highest good in the *Religion* occurs in the preface to the first edition of the work, where he reiterates the same argument that appears in other works. He argues that, despite the fact that our happiness cannot be the ground of morality, "an end proceeds from morality just the same; for it cannot be a matter of indifference to reason how to answer the question, *What is then the result of this right conduct of ours?*"<sup>86</sup> And a few sentences later Kant makes one of the clearest assertions of a new claim—the idea that virtue and happiness, morality and the highest good, function together in one system *in this world*:

Assume a human being who honors the moral law, and who allows himself to think (as he can hardly avoid doing) what sort of world

86. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Ak 6:5.

he would *create*, were this in his power, under the guidance of practical reason—a world within which, moreover, he would place himself as a member. Now, not only would he choose a world precisely as the moral idea of the highest good requires, if the choice were entrusted to him alone, but he would also will the very existence of [such] a world, since the moral law wills that the highest good possible through us be actualized.<sup>87</sup>

Crucially, in this passage Kant no longer talks about the highest good as something that individuals can hope for or have faith in. It is not a transcendental and mysterious goal to be achieved in the afterlife. Rather, the highest good is now “the world [we] would create” given our capacity for practical reason (including pure practical reason, or our ability to recognize and apply the moral law).

But before examining Kant's description of the ethical community in detail, it is worth taking note of some of the other features of Kant's argument in the *Religion* that allow the ethical community to be a shared goal among a community of moral agents. Most importantly, we should take note of Kant's account of human nature and the sources of moral evil in the *Religion*. Recall that, in the earlier discussion of the second *Critique*, we noted that Kant seemed pessimistic about the possibility of moral virtue for any person at any moment on this earth. Indeed, this was the basis for his need to postulate the existence of an afterlife. I argued that Kant's pessimism in that work stems from an attitude toward sensibility and inclination that viewed these features of human existence as necessarily corrupting. In the *Religion*, Kant's attitude toward human nature and the corrupting influence of sensibility has changed.<sup>88</sup>

87. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:5–6.

88. In addition to (or, more precisely, in conjunction with) his changing views about the sources of moral corruption, Kant also changes his views about the nature of moral choice. Rather than casting moral choice as a *denial* of inclination (4:428), Kant now describes moral choice as an act of *subordinating* self-love to the moral law. (See *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Ak 6:36.)

In fact, he argues that “*considered in themselves*, natural inclinations are *good*, i.e. not reprehensible, and to want to extirpate them would not only be futile but harmful and blameworthy as well; we must rather only curb them, so that they will not wear each other out but will instead be harmonized into a whole called happiness.”<sup>89</sup>

Elsewhere, Kant reminds us in a similar vein that the “ground of . . . evil” should not be blamed on “the sensuous nature” and “natural inclinations” of human beings, since “not only do these bear no direct relation to evil . . . they rather give the occasion for what the moral disposition can demonstrate in its power, for virtue.”<sup>90</sup> Both of these passages are telling, not only in their insistence upon the fact that inclination and sensibility are not the sources of evil, but also in their claim that inclination can be an occasion for virtue and “a whole called happiness.” But, of course, such claims should not seem surprising or out of place, given what we have already said about Kant’s notion of humanity and its relationship to the highest good. To respect another person’s humanity is to be virtuous, and this means that respecting others’ ends (which, in turn stem from inclination and desire) is part of what it means to be virtuous. So, far from being a great hindrance to virtue, desire and inclination give us—embodied creatures that we are—an opportunity to practice our virtue.

This relationship between duty and sensibility is also notably present in Kant’s argument in the introduction to the “Doctrine of Virtue” that there are ends that are also duties.<sup>91</sup> Nothing that Kant has to say about these necessary ends in the “Doctrine of Virtue” is, ultimately, at odds with what he has already said about such ends in the *Groundwork*. On the other hand, in the “Doctrine of Virtue” Kant has a more detailed story to tell about

89. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Ak 6:58.

90. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:35.

91. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:382.

what it *means* to act for the sake of the necessary end of humanity. Unsurprisingly, this fuller story shares many features with the account of natural ends and happiness that Kant includes in the discussion of the highest good. Specifically, in the "Doctrine of Virtue" argument, Kant seems to be keenly aware that adopting the necessary end of humanity requires that, as embodied and sensible creatures, we pay close attention to the sensible ends (our own and others') suggested by inclination.

What, then, is Kant's argument in the "Doctrine of Virtue" for the claim that there must be ends that are also duties? In many respects, Kant's argument for the claim that there must be such ends is similar to the line of reasoning that we find in the *Groundwork*. Kant's argument for the claim that there must be some ends that are also duties in the "Doctrine of Virtue" is that "since there are free actions there must also be ends to which, as their objects, these actions are directed. But among these ends there must be some that are also (i.e. by their concept) duties.—For were there no such ends, then all ends would hold for practical reason only as means to other ends."<sup>92</sup>

Nelson Potter has sketched a formalized version of Kant's argument that helps us make sense of Kant's somewhat condensed claims in this passage.<sup>93</sup> Potter claims, correctly, I think, that Kant begins by assuming (1) that a categorical imperative exists and (2) that all action must be for the sake of some end. Now (3), the fact that there is a categorical imperative means that it must be possible to act from duty. Furthermore (4), we know that the end of an action from duty cannot be sensibly determined. So (5) pure practical reason (and not inclination) determines the end of an action from duty. And fi-

92. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:385.

93. Nelson Potter, "Kant on Ends That Are at the Same Time Duties," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66 (1985): 78–82. On the concept of necessary ends, see also See Paul Guyer, "Kant's Correction for a Fatal Flaw," *Harvard Review of Philosophy* 10 (Spring 2002): 64–80.

nally (6), an end determined by pure practical reason is also a duty—that is, it is not one that we have any choice in adopting. We are obliged to adopt that particular end, even though nobody can compel us to do so.

In almost all respects, this argument is similar to the argument presented in the *Groundwork*. In both cases, we assume the existence of some necessary law for action, and we assume that actions that follow such a law must be done from duty and cannot be sensibly determined. Furthermore, in both arguments Kant seems to argue implicitly that we cannot act except for the sake of some end. There is, however, one key difference between the two accounts. In the *Groundwork*, we were obliged to act for the sake of some end, and that end was the humanity (and autonomy) of rational agents. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, we again have a duty to act for the sake of some end, but now there are two ends—first, the happiness of others and second, our own perfection. The main difference between the accounts in the *Groundwork* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*, then, exists not in the argument for necessary ends, but in the claim about what these ends are. So how do we get from one to the other?

The path from the necessary end of humanity to the specific ends in the “Doctrine of Virtue” should, given the discussion of the highest good in the first section of this chapter, be a fairly familiar one. Ultimately, we can make the connection by asking ourselves what is entailed in this world by the requirement to respect a person’s humanity. What defines a person’s humanity is her ability rationally to set and pursue various material ends. In other words, when we put the imperative to respect humanity into practice in this world, we find ourselves faced with duties to perfect our own virtue and promote the happiness of others.<sup>94</sup> In sum, then, it seems that, far from

94. Kant quickly dismisses the idea that the other two possibilities—our own happiness and the perfection of others—could be duties. The first, he argues, is something we already naturally seek, so we cannot properly call it a duty. The



serving as a hindrance to morality, our inclinations and sensible natures actually comprise a large part of our understanding of moral action and moral progress for Kant, and this attitude toward the inclinations is especially apparent in works such as the “Doctrine of Virtue” and the *Religion*. Indeed, without reference to our sensibility, we could hardly make sense of or act upon our duty to protect and promote humanity.

The preceding discussion, I hope, has shown that Kant's attitude toward inclination undergoes something like a revision (or perhaps a change in emphasis) over the course of his writing. In the *Groundwork*—a work whose aim it was to separate the ground of morality from its practical applications—Kant emphasizes the dangers of inclination. This emphasis, I suspect, is a large part of Kant's later assertions that it is impossible for sensible creatures to ever achieve moral perfection. And, indeed, Kant's fundamental assertions about inclination never really change. Thoughtlessly and blindly following one's inclinations can lead only to moral disaster. Crucially, however, Kant's attitude toward inclination in later works is not one of unalloyed pessimism. In the moral communities we inhabit on this earth, agents express their humanity by setting material ends, and it is with these ends that we must concern ourselves as members of a moral community.

Let us return, then, to Kant's description of the ideal ethical community in the *Religion*. What we have with this description of the ethical community is something like the Realm of Ends that Kant discusses in the *Groundwork*. It is a community in which each person is internally motivated by the moral law to respect the end-setting capacity of all of the community's mem-

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latter, Kant says, is something that we ultimately have no control over (*The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:386). In chapter 3, I examine Kant's claim about the perfection of others in more detail and argue that his own philosophy of moral education might belie some of his claims here. See also Lara Denis, *Moral Self-Regard: Duties to Oneself in Kant's Moral Theory* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001).

bers. And, again, Kant thinks we have an obligation to pursue such a community. In a section of the *Religion* entitled "The Human Being Ought to Leave the Ethical State of Nature in Order to Become a Member of the Ethical Community," Kant argues:

Now, here we have a duty *sui generis*, not of human beings toward human beings but of the human race toward itself. For every species of rational beings is objectively—in the idea of reason—destined to a common end, namely the promotion of the highest good as a good common to all. But, since this highest moral good will not be brought about solely through the striving of one individual person for his own moral perfection but requires rather a union of such persons into a whole toward that very end, [i.e.,] toward a system of well-disposed human beings in which, and through the unity of which alone, the highest moral good can come to pass.<sup>95</sup>

There are a few things to note about this crucial passage. The first, of course, is that here Kant explicitly links the ethical community with the highest good (and our duty to pursue the highest good). Second, Kant makes it clear in this passage that the ethical community is a shared goal, or a "good common to all." This is an assertion that is new to Kant's thinking about the highest good. Indeed, in this passage, Kant insists that pursuing the highest good is a duty that the human race has to itself, leaving it at least open that this might be a goal that is pursued over the course of many generations. Later in the *Religion*, Kant makes an even clearer statement of the idea of progress developing over the course of generations when he argues that the "actual setting up" of the ethical community is "still infinitely removed from us . . . since this principle contains the basis for a continual approximation to the ultimate perfection."<sup>96</sup> The achievement of the highest good, understood in terms of the ethical community, is, as this passage makes clear, something that any given generation will probably never witness. Still we

95. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Ak 6:97–98.

96. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:122.

have an obligation to work toward it and, to use Kant's later metaphor, plant these seeds for its eventual accomplishment.

Third and finally, Kant makes the new claim that our working toward the ethical community is itself a social project. As he describes it here, progress toward the highest good requires a "union of . . . persons toward that very end."<sup>97</sup> It seems that Kant is suggesting that, along with being a shared and communal goal, progress toward the highest good must also be a shared and communal project. And, on the face of things, this kind of symmetry might stand to reason. But, on closer inspection, we are forced to ask ourselves what Kant has in mind by saying this, given his own theory of moral action. The problem is this: for Kant, the fact that we have a fundamental choice over our own maxims for action means that we can be held responsible for our own decisions and actions, but not for others' actions and decisions. So, while Kant thinks, on the one hand, that we have an obligation to work together toward a shared goal, he also has a theory of moral action that suggests that we have control over only our own actions. Thus, to channel the type of argument that Lewis White Beck made earlier, we are left wondering what the charge to work together toward the highest good could possibly amount to, if not just to be as individually virtuous as possible. Indeed, Kant admits that we are faced with a kind of coordination problem in accomplishing the highest good when he claims that "we cannot know whether as a whole" the highest good is in our power, because of such problems with the "organization . . . of single individuals."<sup>98</sup>

It is interesting to note a kind of parallel between this worry and the kinds of worries that served as the foundation for Kant's earlier arguments for the postulates of pure practical reason. In the second *Critique*, Kant's argument was that we recognized, through the use of our pure practical reason, the

97. Ibid., Ak 6:97.

98. Ibid.

necessity of the highest good. Since it appeared that the highest good was impossible on this earth, Kant postulated, first, the existence of an afterlife where we could achieve the highest good and, second, a God who could be the author of the laws of nature that make the highest good possible. We were thus entitled to have a kind of moral faith in God and the afterlife. In the *Religion*, what stands in the way of our working toward and achieving the highest good is essentially this problem of co-ordination—the accomplishment of the highest good depends on other agents, over whose decisions we have no control. In the *Religion*, then, we must still have a kind of moral faith in God as the author of the laws of nature. But we must also have a kind of moral faith in the capacity of others to act morally and work toward the highest good. In other words, even though we have no empirical evidence that others will also work toward the ethical community (and, indeed, have much evidence to the contrary), we still have a “moral need” to believe in the possibility of the morality of other agents.<sup>99</sup> We are entitled to have this faith, and we are each compelled to “conduct [ourselves] as if everything depended on [us].”<sup>100</sup>

There is thus a sense in which our working toward the ethical community is an individual project—we have the ability only to determine our own will according to the moral law. But Kant is not, therefore, misguided when he says that the highest good can be realized only through a union of agents. Nor does this claim reduce to the rather trivial observation that the members of this “union” of agents must each be as individually virtuous as possible. Rather, what Kant seems to have in mind is that the highest good can be achieved only if the entire community recognizes its obligation to work toward this end and decides which actions are more likely to help bring about this end. Though we have no ultimate control over others’ actions,

99. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:98.

100. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:101.

we also know that certain actions and institutions tend to have a beneficial impact on the virtue (and happiness) of others. It is clear, for example, that making a unified choice to devote energy and resources to educating children will help bring us closer to the highest good. This, then, is the sense in which our working toward the highest good is and ought to be a shared project.

*Objections to the "Secular" Account*

Over the course of this section, I have argued that we can see a clear shift and evolution in Kant's thinking about how the highest good is to be accomplished. Though the practical underpinnings of Kant's concept of the highest good remain stable (that is, the highest good remains a "need arising from reason"), Kant's picture of how and when it is to come about undergoes a revision of sorts. While the earlier accounts of the highest good insisted upon individual happiness as a kind of reward for individual virtue, Kant's most mature account envisions the highest good as consisting of the shared happiness that is the natural result of shared or general virtue. One result of this shift, as I have argued, is that Kant no longer needs to postulate the afterlife in order to make his assertions about the highest good possible. It is important to emphasize that this does not leave Kant with a *wholly* secular account of the highest good. In order for general happiness to follow from general virtue, Kant must still posit an author of the laws of nature who makes it possible (and indeed predictable) that happiness will, over time, follow from virtue. This may seem like a small consolation for the reader of Kant who favors the more transcendent view, but it bears pointing out that this component of Kant's thought seems to undergo no major revision.

Still, before we move on to see how Kant's revised conception of the highest good might have a particular impact on the way that we view the role of various social institutions in our lives, it is worth noting a few passages and arguments in which

Kant perhaps seems less than univocal about this more secular conception of the highest good. Ultimately, I think, we can make sense of these passages and arguments within the context of the interpretation I have given thus far. Nevertheless, they deserve some attention.

Chief among these puzzling arguments is Kant's claim that God's role in the ethical community is not just to be the author of the laws of nature, but also to serve as a kind of divine legislator who has the ability to "see into the heart" of each person. Kant's argument for this claim appears in the context of a distinction between the juridical state and the ethical community. Because the ethical community is not governed by a system of external law, it cannot have a human lawgiver. Kant continues:

There must therefore be someone other than the people whom we can declare the public lawgiver of an ethical community. But neither can ethical laws be thought as proceeding *originally* merely from the will of this superior (as statutes that would not be binding without his prior sanction), for then they would not be ethical laws and the duty commensurate to them would not be free virtue but an externally enforceable legal duty. Therefore only such a one can be thought of as the supreme lawgiver of an ethical community, with respect to whom all *true duties*, hence also the ethical, must be represented as *at the same time* his commands; consequently, he must also be one who knows the heart, in order to penetrate to the most intimate parts of the dispositions of each and everyone and, as must be in every community, give each according to the worth of his actions. Hence an ethical community is conceivable only as a people under divine commands, i.e. as a *people of God*, and indeed *in accordance with the laws of virtue*.<sup>101</sup>

The first of Kant's claims is a relatively uncontroversial one: if we are to live in an ethical community, then our laws cannot be of the coercive sort dictated by a human authority. But Kant goes on to claim that "someone other than the people" must be

101. Ibid., Ak 6:99.

the lawgiver in an ethical community. But why say that a law-giver is necessary at all? If the moral law is something that we give to ourselves through reason, why should we posit any lawgiver at all? Kant himself admits that we cannot think of the moral law as the voluntaristic requirement of a divine authority. Clearly, an action motivated by fear of divine retribution would be no more virtuous than one motivated by fear of human retribution. In almost the same breath, however, Kant says that the moral law must be "represented as at the same time [God's command]."<sup>102</sup> What could Kant possibly have in mind by making all of these claims, essentially back to back?

Sharon Anderson-Gold suggests a solution that focuses on the next few claims that Kant makes in the passage above.<sup>103</sup> She points out that the ethical community is importantly different from the juridical state in another important respect: in the juridical state, the only things being "judged" are individuals' external actions. If an external action is consistent with what the law requires, then that action is a legal one. A person's motivations make no difference in a juridical state. The situation is, of course, different when it comes to an ethical community, since there, a person's motivation is a relevant fact in determining whether her action is virtuous. The legislator in an ethical community, then, is that entity who can judge the motivations (and not just the external manifestations) of our actions. So, as Kant says, this legislator must be one who can "penetrate to the most intimate parts of the dispositions of each and everyone."<sup>104</sup>

On the face of things, this seems like a plausible solution.

102. Ibid.

103. Sharon Anderson-Gold, "God and Community: An Inquiry into the Religious Implication of the Highest Good," in *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, ed. Philip J. Rossi and Michael Wreen, 113–131 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

104. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Ak 6:99.

It certainly has the virtue of pointing to one of the most (if not the most) significant differences between the juridical state and the ethical community, that is, the question of moral motivation. But this solution to Kant's claims about a divine legislator immediately raises another set of questions. To see the force of these questions, we need only look to Kant's next sentence, where he says that the role of this omniscient, divine legislator is to "give each according to the worth of his actions."<sup>105</sup> In other words, the ethical community requires a divine legislator who can discern our motives for acting, because otherwise it would be impossible for such a legislator to distribute happiness according to each person's moral worth. But this seems like a particularly strange thing for Kant to say in this passage, since, as we have just established, other arguments in the *Religion* suggest that Kant thinks that God no longer has anything like this role. And if God no longer has the role of parceling out happiness in accord with each person's virtue, then it is unclear why the ethical community would even require a divine legislator who can see into the hearts of its members. The happiness of the community should follow naturally from the virtue of the community's members, since this virtue just consists of allowing individuals to pursue and (often, though not always) achieve their ends, so long as these ends are consistent with others' ends.

So what sense can we make of this passage in the *Religion* where Kant posits a divine legislator? The preponderance of evidence for the immanent, communal account of the highest good in the *Religion* suggests that we should seek some plausible explanation before simply asserting that Kant is now reverting to the individualist account of, for example, the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Rather, I would suggest that Kant's claims about a divine legislator are themselves a kind of transitional

105. Ibid.



account of the divine, and these kinds of ideas are by no means unique to the cited passages in the *Religion*.

In a piece labeled "Practical Self-Positing and the Idea of God" by the editors of the Cambridge edition of the *Opus Postumum*, Kant uses many of the same terms that appear in the *Religion* to describe God's role in human morality. There, however, it becomes clear that Kant thinks we ought only to think of God *as if* he were a kind of divine legislator. So, for example, Kant comments on the "necessity of acting in such a way *as if* I stood under such a fearsome—but yet, at the same time, salutary guidance and also guarantee, in the knowledge of all my duties as divine commands."<sup>106</sup> A little later, Kant explains in the context of discussing God's existence that "the supersensible is not an object of possible experience . . . but merely a judgment by analogy—that is, to the relational concept of a synthetic judgment, namely, to think all human duties *as if* divine commands and in relation to a person."<sup>107</sup> Now, the idea that God is not a "possible object of experience" is, of course, nothing new for Kant. But it is noteworthy that Kant seems to have abandoned making any claims about the practical use of reason here. Before, while speculative reason could not tell us anything about God's existence, we could still postulate such an existence through the use of practical reason. Here, Kant follows a different, altogether more agnostic route: he simply says that we should think of our duties as if they were divine commands. And these passages are not isolated instances. Indeed, it is a theme of Kant's discussion in this piece that we think in such analogical terms.<sup>108</sup>

106. Immanuel Kant, *Opus Postumum*, trans. Eckhart Förster and Michael Rosen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Ak 22:116, my emphasis.

107. *Ibid.*, Ak. 22:120, Kant's emphasis.

108. For example: "In moral-practical reason, there is contained the principle of knowledge of my duties as commands (*praecepta*), that is, not according to the rule which makes the subject into and [object], but that which emerges from freedom and which [the subject] prescribes to itself, and yet as if another and

But what about Kant's apparent claims in the *Religion* that a divine legislator is required so that the motivations of agents might be known? Interestingly, these claims have an analog in the "Practical Self-Positing" piece as well. But in the latter piece, Kant abandons any mention of a kind of divine retributive force and instead focuses on the bindingness of the moral law. In particular, Kant seems to want to explain how it can be that a law that we give to ourselves can be just as binding as one, for example, handed down to us by God. Thus, in a very telling passage, Kant points out:

There are two ways in which men postulate the existence of God; they say sometimes: There exists a divine *judge* and *avenger*, for wickedness and *crime* require the extinction of this loathsome race. On the other hand, reason thinks of an *achievement* [*Verdienst*] of which man is capable—to be able to place himself in a higher *class*, namely that of autonomous (through moral-practical reason) beings, and to raise himself above all merely sensuous beings (and he has a vocation so to do); he is such a being, not merely *hypothetically*, but has a destination to enter that state, to be the originator of his own rank—that is, obligated and yet thereby self-obligating.<sup>109</sup>

Here, Kant explicitly rejects the idea that God's role is that of "judge" or "avenger." Rather, God seems now to be a kind of symbol for the autonomous law giving that we can "raise" ourselves to. Thus, a few lines later, Kant concludes that "there must be—or at least be thought—a legislative force which gives these laws emphasis (effect) *although only in idea*."<sup>110</sup>

In sum, then, it seems that part of the reason for Kant's emphasis on the divine in the "Practical Self-Positing" piece (and perhaps even the *Religion*) has to do with the feeling of

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higher person had made it a rule for him" (ibid., Ak 22:129). Also, "The categorical imperative does not presuppose a supremely commanding substance which would be outside me, but is rather a command or prohibition of my own reason. Notwithstanding this, it is nevertheless to be regarded as proceeding from a being who has irresistible power over all" (ibid., Ak 22:51).

109. Ibid., Ak 22:117.

110. Ibid., Ak 22:126, my emphasis.

respect or awe that we feel in the face of recognizing our duty. So, for example, Kant echoes his claims of the second *Critique* that duty, itself, cannot be felt, but that "there is, indeed, a feeling from the representation of our duty."<sup>111</sup> And later, Kant observes that "the subject of the categorical imperative in me is an object which deserves to be obeyed: an object of adoration. . . . The characteristic of a moral being which can command categorically over the nature of man is its divinity."<sup>112</sup> In short, it is nearly impossible for us to represent the moral law to ourselves without at least making some kind of analogy to a divine will, even though we know that this is not its source. Thus, in what is perhaps one of the most cryptic (but perhaps also most telling) passages in the piece, Kant concludes: "There is a God in moral-practical reason, that is, in the idea of the relation of man to right and duty. But not as a being outside man. God and man is the totality of things."<sup>113</sup>

In examination of Kant's discussion of the highest good in the *Religion*, then, a clear progression in Kant's thought on the highest good becomes apparent. Throughout Kant's thought, the highest good plays the important role of necessary object, without which humans could not be expected to act virtuously. But beyond this, very little about Kant's account stays the same. What starts as an argument for the existence of God and the afterlife ends up as an argument for an ideal end of history, where God plays a very limited role. While happiness, in earlier accounts, is enjoyed by individuals as a kind of reward for their own virtue, in the account in the *Religion* it is shared by the community as the natural result of their shared virtue. And though Kant does, perhaps, make contradictory or confusing

111. Ibid., Ak 22:118; for Kant's discussion of the feeling of "respect" that follows from our awareness of the moral law see the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:72–76.

112. *Opus Postumum*, Ak 22:129–130.

113. Ibid., Ak 22:60.

statements in his later work, we should keep in mind not just the textual evidence, but the quality and content of Kant's argument. There are two features of Kant's argument that we should pay close attention to in this respect.

First, as I have noted throughout this section, Kant's attitude toward the inclinations and our sensible natures undergoes a significant revision—in terms of both its content and the implications of this attitude. In the *Groundwork* and second *Critique*, especially, Kant's view seems to be that the inclinations are corrupting and that virtue—even for one moment—is impossible for sensible creatures like ourselves. Kant's argument for the necessity of positing an afterlife seems to be based largely on these claims about the impossibility of virtue for us in this life. But later, in the argument in the "Doctrine of Virtue" that there are ends that are also duties, and in the *Religion*, Kant changes his attitude toward our sensible nature and argues instead that our inclinations actually provide the *opportunity* for us to act morally. As Kant's pessimism about the inclinations fades, so too does the main plank in his argument for the necessity of an afterlife. In short, then, Kant no longer needs to appeal to the transcendent account, and his sketch of the highest good in the *Religion* reflects this fact.

Second, and most important, Kant's later view of the highest good is altogether more consistent with the assertions that he makes—even in the second *Critique*—that we have a special kind of duty to pursue the highest good. And, more to the point when it comes to the focus of this book, the rest of Kant's work on practical philosophy is full of *actual suggestions* about how we might go about pursuing the highest good. On a very fundamental level, these facts seem inconsistent with the more "theological" view. Why would Kant say that we have a duty to pursue the highest good, and then give suggestions about how to do it (educating children, improving public discourse, pursuing certain kinds of relationships), if all of those activi-

ties were totally useless from the perspective of achieving the highest good? Of course, these types of activities might make life on earth more pleasant and convenient, but that—as we will soon see—is not the primary merit that Kant sees in them.<sup>114</sup>

### *Radical Evil and the Highest Good*

Before we move on to discuss the ways in which the interpretation of Kant's account of the highest good offered here has important implications for the way we view his theory and the moral obligations suggested by it, it is worth pausing to consider the relationship between Kant's conception of the highest good and another of his central concepts, that of radical evil. In this section, I will give a brief overview of Kant's concept of radical evil, paying close attention to the sense in which we can call such evil a "propensity" or "part of our nature." I will then discuss some of the ways in which Kant's account of the highest good may appear to address the concerns raised by the problem of radical evil. I conclude by arguing that the account of the highest good for which I have argued thus far actually serves as a more coherent way to resolve the problems raised by radical evil than the other, transcendent account.

In some sense, radical evil is just the necessary yet unfortunate corollary to our capacity for freedom and moral choice. Kant doesn't call evil "radical" because it is inexplicable or because our nature as sensible being necessitates us to make bad choices. It is "radical" because it is attached to our fundamental capacity for moral choice. So, for example, he explains

114. Still, it bears pointing out that even the scholar who rejects the more secular interpretation that I have given should still be able to find something of interest in the remainder of this book. In this case, one can easily think of the suggestions that Kant gives regarding, for example, friendship and education, as aids to moral virtue. And regardless of which interpretation of the highest good one adopts, we can agree that Kant thinks we have an obligation to improve ourselves morally.

that "whenever we therefore say, 'the human being is by nature good,' or, 'He is by nature evil,' this only means that he holds within himself a first ground (to us inscrutable) for the adoption of good or evil (unlawful) maxims."<sup>115</sup>

Throughout the discussion of radical evil in the *Religion*, Kant is at pains to emphasize the fact that evil is a product of our power of choice, or our ability to formulate and act upon maxims. Clearly, this is the only position consistent with Kant's emphasis on moral responsibility and imputability. If, for example, humans were subject to original sin, or were determined to be "evil" as a result of their sensible natures, we could hardly ascribe responsibility to them for their moral failings. Thus, in the same passage, Kant continues to explain that this "subjective ground" in which the basis of evil is to found in our natures "must . . . always be a deed of freedom (for otherwise the use or abuse of the human being's power of choice with respect to the moral law could not be imputed to him, nor could the good or evil in him be called 'moral')." <sup>116</sup>

Evil, according to Kant, is thus an unavoidable product of our power of choice. The same capacity that allows us to choose to act for the sake of the moral law also allows us to fail to make this choice. When we say that human beings are "by nature" evil, this is what we mean. We do not mean, in any case, that human beings are born with evil, or that we cannot help but be evil. Nevertheless, in Kant's view, we ought to take seriously the problem of radical evil, since it is pervasive. To be sure, none of us is, strictly speaking, necessitated to be evil. Yet each one of us, in our subjective ground of choice, has the capacity for evil; no one is exempt from this possibility. Each of us is witness to "the multitude of woeful examples that the experience of human deeds parades before us." It is, Kant thinks, a problem that demands attention.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>115</sup>. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Ak 6:21.

<sup>116</sup>. *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup>. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:32.

Given that evil is rooted in our nature as free agents, and given its pervasiveness, we may be tempted to think that humans will need some kind of special, otherworldly help to escape the pattern of evil grounded in our subjective power of choice. And we may be especially tempted to think that such transcendental help is required if we think primarily of Kant's account of sensibility as it appears, for example, in the *Groundwork* and second *Critique*. As we have seen, in those works, Kant seems to think of our sensible nature as little more than a persistent and inescapable temptation to make the wrong kinds of moral choices. And there are passages in the *Religion* where Kant evinces such pessimism. So, for example, he claims that

the human being, so far as we have cognition of him, is corrupted and *of himself* not in the least adequate to the holy law. However, if the goodness of God has called him as it were into being, i.e. has invited him to a particular kind of existence (to be a member of the Kingdom of Heaven), he must also have a means of compensating, from the fullness of his holiness, for the human being's inadequacy with respect to it.<sup>118</sup>

Kant's claim here seems to be that human beings require divine assistance to purge their natures of radical evil. Elsewhere, in a similar vein, Kant observes that "evil is *radical*, since it corrupts the ground of all maxims; as natural propensity, it is also not to be *extirpated* through human forces."<sup>119</sup>

Also perhaps telling in this regard are Kant's references to the role of grace in the *Religion*. Kant seems at times to have a conflicted attitude toward grace, stemming presumably from the fact that, as we have seen throughout this chapter, his moral philosophy contains several fixed positions that are seemingly irreconcilable. First, of course, there is Kant's hard line on responsibility and imputability. Moral choice must be a

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., Ak 6:143, my emphasis.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., Ak 6:37.

product of an individual's free power of choice; it cannot, in any case, be something that is taken up by another agent—even God himself. But Kant is by no means sanguine about the difficulty of moral choice. Our sensible and sometimes selfish natures, combined with the fact that we do in fact have this power of choice, mean that evil is a real and constant danger in the world. Of course, these two facts together present a bleak, but not altogether contradictory or problematic, view. What seems to cause the tension with respect to grace for Kant is the assertion that we have investigated throughout this chapter—namely, that perfect virtue must be possible for moral agents.

Given Kant's firm stance on moral responsibility, he cannot hold a view of grace that involves so-called prevenient grace.<sup>120</sup> This type of grace does not rely at all upon human moral choice—in effect, it simply overrides or preempts our power of choice. And Kant is explicit that accepting such a view of grace would be a contradiction within his moral system. So, for example, he says that “to expect an effect of grace means . . . that the good (the morally good) is not of our doing, but that of another being—that we, therefore, can only *come by* it by *doing nothing*, and this contradicts itself.”<sup>121</sup>

Nevertheless, there remains the possibility that Kant is open to another kind of grace, so-called sanctifying grace. Unlike prevenient grace, sanctifying grace maintains the insistence upon moral agency and responsibility, since it requires that an agent do all that is within her power, morally speaking. Once she has done all that she can, prevenient grace “steps in,” as it were, and removes any remaining obstacles that may stand in the way of moral perfection. So, for example, Kant says that it is “customary . . . to call *nature* what can be done by the human

120. For a discussion of the difference between prevenient grace and sanctifying grace, see Robert Merrihew Adams's introduction to *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, xxi.

121. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:53.



being on the strength of the principle of virtue, and *grace* what only serves to supplement the deficiency of all his moral capacity."<sup>122</sup> Something like sanctifying grace is certainly present, for example, in Kant's account of the postulate of immortality in the second *Critique*.

Still, Kant seems to have legitimate concerns even about this type of grace. In a longer discussion of sanctifying grace, Kant worries that this type of grace is still "risky and hard to reconcile with reason; for what is accredited to us as morally good conduct must take place not through foreign influence but only through the use of our own powers."<sup>123</sup> Kant stops short, however, of calling sanctifying grace an *impossibility*, "since freedom itself . . . remains just as incomprehensible to us according to its possibility as the supernatural [something] we might want to assume as surrogate for the independent yet deficient determination of freedom."<sup>124</sup> Still, it is important to be clear about Kant's assertion in this passage. By no means is he claiming that sanctifying grace is the solution to the problem of human limitation or evil. At best, he is simply saying that we cannot say that it is *not* the solution, since the workings of human freedom remain a mystery to us. And in the discussion that follows this passage, Kant seems to think that, for practical purposes, we would do well to forget about grace altogether:

But since we are at least acquainted with the (moral) *laws* of freedom according to which the latter [i.e., freedom] is to be determined, whereas of a supernatural assistance . . . we can have not the least cognition, so apart from the general presupposition that grace will work in us what nature cannot . . . we cannot make further use of this idea at all, neither for determining how (over and above the constant striving for a good life-conduct) we might draw down upon us the cooperation of grace, nor on what occasions we might expect it.<sup>125</sup>

122. Ibid., Ak 6:173–174.

124. Ibid.

123. Ibid., Ak 6:191.

125. Ibid.

Kant's point here is an important one from the perspective of the investigation of this book. Even assuming that something like sanctifying grace will serve as the solution to the problem outlined above, this changes little or nothing about the ways we ought to reason morally, or the choices we ought to make. We are still commanded to do all that we can to improve morally and, ultimately, pursue the highest good. So facts about grace, in short, change nothing about the kinds of relationships and institutions that we ought to pursue as moral agents.

In any case, Kant's discussions of grace, along with his pessimism about the impossibility of "extirpating" evil from human nature, suggest that Kant is concerned about our capability as humans to ever eliminate evil altogether, and there is a sense in which this is true—after all, as long as we have the power of choice, we will have the capacity for evil. But there is also a sense in which a hope for the elimination of evil is a bit of a red herring, since it is not even clear that such elimination is necessary for moral progress or moral perfection. With respect to these imperatives, we ought to focus on *overcoming* our nature as opposed to *extirpating* it. And when it comes to "overcoming" evil (*überwiegen*), it is not so clear that we need any kind of divine assistance. So, Kant continues, "it must equally be possible to *overcome* this evil, for it is found in the human being as acting freely."<sup>126</sup>

Nevertheless, we should avoid assuming that the "solution" to the problem of radical evil is simply and consistently to make the right moral choices. First, this solution bears little resemblance to the way we actually experience moral choice and conflict; morally charged situations hardly come at us as isolated instances in linear sequences. Overcoming evil, in other words, seems less a project of making the right choices at the right times, and more a project involving developing

126. Ibid., Ak 6:37.

certain character traits, or constructing the narratives that describe the relationships that we have with other members of our community. Furthermore, in the *Religion's* discussion of evil, Kant famously points out the pernicious influence of society on moral choice. Echoing Rousseau, he points out that one particularly troublesome source of evil is our tendency to compare ourselves with one another and constantly seek supremacy over one another.<sup>127</sup> Kant is keenly aware that evil—though made possible by the power of choice that we have—is not so simply eradicated. Or, in other words, that for a whole host of reasons, simply making the right moral choices is a difficult and complex enterprise. Of course, this observation doesn't necessarily pose any logical or theoretical problem when it comes to overcoming radical evil, but it does suggest that the process of overcoming evil—if it is to occur without some kind of divine assistance—will have to take place over time and within the relationships that often mark the boundaries of our moral lives.<sup>128</sup>

Most fundamentally, then, I suggest that radical evil poses

127. See especially *ibid.*, Ak 6:26–28. Useful secondary discussion on the social sources of evil can be found in Sharon Anderson-Gold, *Unnecessary Evil* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Jeanine M. Grenberg, "Social Dimensions of Kant's Conception of Radical Evil," in *Kant's Anatomy of Evil*, ed. Sharon Anderson-Gold and Pablo Muchnik, 173–194 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

128. Perhaps even more problematic to the question of how to overcome evil is Kant's claim in the *Religion* that moral goodness or evil is not a matter of making the right isolated choices, but rather a matter of making the right choice on an inexplicable, noumenal level. (See especially Ak 6:43, 6:48.) We may, as a result, be tempted to think that Kant is setting himself up for the claim that divine intervention or grace is a necessary component of overcoming evil. Interestingly, however, what follows Kant's discussion of noumenal choice is not a discussion of grace, but rather a *discussion of moral education*: "From this [i.e., the inscrutability of moral choice], it follows that a human being's moral education must begin, not with an improvement of mores, but with a transformation of his attitude of mind and establishment of a character, although it is customary to proceed otherwise and fight vices individually" (Ak 6:48).

a serious problem because it points to how limited we are, despite our fundamental capacity to be the authors of our own actions. And, interestingly, the problem of radical evil points to how limited we are from the perspective of both “halves” of the highest good. Most obviously, radical evil serves as a reminder of our limitation as moral agents. As we have already seen, it points to the fact that bound up in our very capacity for moral choice is the capacity to make serious moral error. And, from the perspective of happiness, the fact of radical evil forces us to realize that our happiness is always a very contingent matter. Not only is it contingent upon nonmoral “forces of nature,” but it is also contingent upon the moral choices that we and others make. Thus, radical evil is more than simply the theoretical corollary of the moral capacity. It has very real and very troubling implications for agents who find themselves trying to pursue virtue and happiness in a world marked by the presence of such evil.

This feature of radical evil has led some commentators to note the sense of “homelessness” or incompleteness that agents quite reasonably feel upon surveying the moral landscape they find themselves in.<sup>129</sup> On the one hand, the Kantian agent recognizes the moral law, and feels herself bound by it. And, because she recognizes the moral law, she also recognizes that she has an obligation to pursue the highest good. But she also recognizes that she is essentially limited in her abilities to pursue the highest good. True, there is nothing—logically speaking—that stands between an agent and moral perfection. But realistically speaking, the Kantian agent must realize that the deck is stacked against her for the reasons noted above. Indeed, when we consider Kant’s observations about the social sources

129. See Philip J. Rossi, S.J., “Kant’s ‘Metaphysics of Permanent Rupture’: Radical Evil and the Unity of Reason,” in *Kant’s Anatomy of Evil*, ed. Sharon Anderson-Gold and Pablo Muchnik, 13–32 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

of evil, the task of pursuing the highest good looks difficult at best.

All of these observations may initially make it seem as though the “transcendent” account of the highest good provides a better resolution to this sense of limitation than the account I have argued for in this chapter. In the first instance, the transcendent account assures us that we can reach perfect virtue. Kant’s positing of the afterlife and of eventual perfection assures us that the gap between what the moral law requires of us and what we have—until this point—shown ourselves capable of will diminish over time. Second, of course, Kant’s transcendent account of the highest good serves as a response to this sense of limitation because it assures us that our moral striving will be met with the happiness we deserve, even if, in this life, our striving is met with unhappiness, often as a result of the immoral choices of others. Kant’s early account of the highest good promises to make us whole, in some sense.<sup>130</sup> In sum, then, we may worry that we have lost something with the account of the highest good I have presented here. Without assurance that we will reach perfection, and without assurance that our moral willing will not go unrecognized from the perspective of deserved happiness, how can we overcome what seem to be very real limitations with respect to our moral power to achieve the highest good?

In order to see how the “secular” account of the highest good can still serve as an answer to the worries posed by human evil, we will, I think, have to reconceive of the way we think about agency to a certain extent. Of course, I am not suggesting anything as drastic as questioning Kant’s claims about

130. Again, this is not to say that Kantian agents do or ought only to act because they can be assured that their happiness will follow. But Kant recognizes—I think quite astutely—that a moral theory that made demands on the willing of agents while being indifferent to the outcome of such willing would be rather implausible.

individual moral responsibility for one's choices. But, on the other hand, there is a sense in which morality, and especially moral improvement, is much more of a shared project than can be fully outlined by simply looking at Kant's fundamental assertions about individual moral agency. If we think of the project of moral improvement that the highest good demands as being a project to which we do our best to contribute, even if we never see its fulfillment, then we can begin to feel as though we at least have some efficacy in the face of moral evil.

# MORAL ACTION AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT

*The Mechanisms of Progress*



IN THE LAST CHAPTER, we saw that Kant's moral philosophy is teleological in a sense not typically acknowledged by many of his critics. Specifically, the end sought by Kantian morality is one of an ethical community, realizable on earth, rather than merely hoped for or expected in the afterlife. By itself, this fact about Kant's moral theory allows us to see his thought in a new light. Though he is often (and correctly) contrasted with consequentialist moral theories, it becomes clear that Kant, too, is concerned about the consequences and ends of our actions. For Kant, however, these consequences serve only as the object, but not the ground, of our moral action.

Still, given Kant's concern with the object of moral action, and given his argument that this object is both immanent and social, we can begin to see the crucial role that social institutions (broadly understood) might play in Kant's ethics. In subsequent chapters, I examine some of these institutions and relationships, and sketch the role that each plays in furthering the end of moral action. But before we examine these social relationships in detail, there is a gap of sorts that needs to be filled in. Specifically, we need to see how it is that social relationships and institutions can have any efficacy in *bringing about* the object of moral action. This may seem, at first glance, like a relatively straightforward task. Certainly, we might think, if the ends of a moral system are social, the means to those ends must

also be social. But in the case of Kant's moral theory, the connection is not so easily made. This is because Kant seems, on the face of things, to have a relatively atomistic view of moral decision making and action. The worry is that it might be the case that the *end* of moral action is a kind of ethical community, but that the *means* to that end are still precisely those atomistic decisions that many of Kant's critics take issue with. In other words, in order to achieve a kind of moral community, it might still be the case that each agent, on her own, uses a categorical imperative procedure in order to determine which actions are required of her, and then acts—from a mysterious motivation whose source is entirely her own—according to what the moral law requires. If this were the case, then my claim in the previous chapter that Kantian agents should pursue various relationships and institutions would seem to fall flat. If these institutions and relationships cannot help us achieve the highest good—if only we can help ourselves—then the project cannot get off the ground.

Fortunately, while there is some truth to such a sketch of Kant's account of moral decision making and motivation, it is also the case that this picture does not give us a complete account of Kantian agency. Part of the task of this chapter will be to provide a more complete account of Kantian agency and the possibilities for social influences upon that agency. Specifically, I will argue that the picture of isolated decision making presented above gives us only a limited view of Kant's theory. Instead, we ought to keep in mind that Kant's account of agency also has a great deal to say about practicing certain habits of thinking and developing certain motivational aids over the course of a lifetime. And while these habits and character traits may not be necessary at any given moment of choice, they nevertheless play an important role in the moral development of agents over a lifetime. Furthermore, when we shift our focus to the progress of a moral community—as opposed to in-



dividual moral choices—these habits of thought and character traits take on added importance. Indeed, from the perspective of enabling the progress of a moral community, we can even begin to see how aiding in the development of these habits and character traits becomes a duty in its own right.

To this end, this chapter will first review some of Kant's basic claims about individual moral decision making and motivation. We will see in the course of that discussion that a relatively strong conclusion about moral responsibility becomes readily apparent on this account. Specifically, any Kantian agent with some basic capacities for reason should be able to reason morally and be motivated to act from duty. In other words, the fact that a particular agent did not have access to the institutions described in the remainder of this book will serve as no excuse for moral wrongdoing—though of course, we might have a certain degree of sympathy for that agent and the difficulties that her circumstances present. This presents a version of the problem presented at the outset of this chapter—how can we say that certain social institutions are important or even necessary when moral action is ultimately “up to the agent”?

The next section of this chapter begins to answer this worry by changing the focus of Kantian agency from a focus on individual choices to a focus on the kinds of character traits and habits of thought that an agent acquires over the course of a lifetime. Seen from this perspective, the institutions and relationships described in the remaining chapters of this book take on an added importance. Moral education, friendship, and participation in a republican government are all activities that develop these character traits and modes of thought, making it more likely that agents will act from duty. Of course, the critic would still be right to wonder if this fact makes these institutions any more important or necessary; the simple fact that an activity will make a person more likely to act from duty does

not seem to change the ultimate picture of responsibility presented above. The response to that criticism is presented at the end of the chapter. Specifically, we ought to keep in mind that, with his theory of the highest good, Kant has added to his system a nontrivial duty to pursue a kind of ethical community. Given the fact that we have this obligation, I argue, we also have an obligation to pursue and promote the kinds of institutions and relationships that make progress toward this goal more likely. We have, in Kantian terms, an indirect duty to pursue the institutions and relationships described in the remainder of this book.

*Isolated Decision Making and Motivation:  
The Classic Account*

Perhaps one of the most well known facts about Kant's moral theory is that Kant thinks of moral decision making and judgment as a personal practice based in the agent's capacity for pure practical reason. Kant insists that the moral law is derived from pure reason, and not from sentiment, reference to God's arbitrary will, or reference to the norms of one's society. So, for example, in the *Groundwork*, Kant sketches a four-fold distinction among "possible principles of morality."<sup>1</sup> The first two "possible principles" that Kant rejects are those derived from empirical principles. These can be based on either physical feeling or moral feeling. With the former, Kant has something like psychological hedonism in mind: an agent whose principle of morality is based in his own physical feeling will be motivated to act for the sake of his own satisfaction and pleasure. With the latter, Kant has in mind moral sense theories that have as their basis of moral judgment a feeling of disinterested approval for virtuous actions. Kant explicitly

1. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:441.

names Francis Hutcheson's theory as an example.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that moral sense theories at least "[show] virtue the honor of ascribing to her *immediately* the delight and esteem we have for her," both types of empirical principle are fundamentally problematic because they are heteronomous.<sup>3</sup> Because they admit of empirical principles, they can never provide a necessary and universal law of morality. As Kant puts it a few lines later, "the imperative is conditional, namely: *if* or *because* one wills this object, one ought to act in such and such a way; hence it can never command morally, that is categorically."<sup>4</sup> In the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant makes a similar distinction between the types of empirical principles.<sup>5</sup> But there, Kant also notes that an external empirical principle is the principle adopted by those who think of morality as "merely a custom" that derives primarily from education and sovereign authority. Again, Kant rejects both of these candidates, arguing that any empirical ground for a moral law—even an appeal to a moral sense—will be contingent. Thus, Kant argues, a practical principle that must, by definition, be universally lawgiving cannot be based in anything empirical, and must, therefore, be based in pure practical reason.<sup>6</sup> As he puts it in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, "A rule is objectively and universally valid only when it holds without the contingent, subjective conditions that distinguish one rational being from another."<sup>7</sup>

Of course not all principles of morality rest on empirical principles; they can also be based on rational principles, and Kant lists two further sources for the moral law (thus complet-

2. Ibid., Ak 4:442n.

3. Ibid., Ak 4:442–443.

4. Ibid., Ak 4:444.

5. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:253.

6. See also *ibid.*, Ak 27:254: "If I consider my free choice, it is a conformity of free choice with itself and others. It is thus a necessary law of free choice. But those principles which are supposed to be everywhere, always and necessarily valid, cannot be derived from experience, but only from pure reason."

7. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:21.

ing the “fourfold distinction” with which he begins the discussion): rational principles that are “based on the ontological concept of *perfection*” and those rational principles that find their source in human reason itself.<sup>8</sup> The former, Kant admits, are still more suitable for grounding a moral theory than either of the empirical principles listed earlier. Nevertheless, he thinks, the principle of perfection seems to collapse into the principle based on human reason, since “it has an unavoidable propensity to get involved in a circle and cannot avoid covertly presupposing the morality which it is supposed to explain.”<sup>9</sup> Kant’s claim that this type of justification has a tendency to “get involved in a circle” suggests that he thinks there is a sense in which we cannot help but explain the principles of morality by any means other than our own reason. If we try to explain or justify apparently voluntaristic principles, we ultimately fall back on trying to justify them with the use of our own reason. A truly arbitrary will that dictates moral principles is anathema to us. Kant makes an almost identical distinction between two types of possible “intellectual” grounds for morality in the *Lectures on Ethics*, arguing that principles that “have a relation to a being other than ourselves” are “erroneous, for the difference between moral good and evil does not consist in our relationship with another being; the intellectual moral principle is internal.”<sup>10</sup> In both discussions, then, Kant argues that to think of the moral law in this way is to reason incorrectly about its source. Thus Kant takes himself to have shown us by elimination what we already, in some sense, knew: the source of the moral law is a rational principle based in pure reason.

This claim is central to Kant’s system of moral philosophy, and it is certainly one of his more controversial claims. But Kant thinks that this claim should not come as much of

8. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:443.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:255.

a surprise to any reader who reflects on the practice of moral willing and action. Indeed, he premises his discussion of the moral law in the opening section of the *Groundwork* upon just the presumption that our awareness of what morality requires of us is a matter of *common sense*, rather than divine dictate or emotional reaction. He observes that "the idea that there must be such a [pure moral] philosophy is clear of itself from the common idea of duty and of moral laws."<sup>11</sup> Later, he concludes that understanding the universal law formulation of the categorical imperative is, itself, actually a matter of thinking carefully from common sense: "*I do not . . . need any penetrating acuteness to see what I have to do in order that my volition be morally good. In experiences in the course of the world, incapable of being prepared for whatever might come to pass in it, I ask myself only: can you also will that your maxim become a universal law?*"<sup>12</sup>

Kant's views on this matter, of course, become patently clear in his famous "fact of reason" statement in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. There, he claims that "pure reason is practical of itself alone and gives (to the human being) a universal law which we call the *moral law*."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps if anything is clear about Kant's moral system, it is that Kant thinks that the moral law has its ground in reason alone, and that reason, working by itself, is able to discover what the moral law requires of us. We do not require any special skill or talent to discern these things; they follow from the capacity for practical reason that most of us share. There seems, as a result, to be no social component to how an individual comes to know the moral law.

Of course, knowing what the moral law requires of us is

11. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:389.

12. *Ibid.*, Ak 4:403–404, my emphasis. Also see Ak 4:391: "In moral matters human reason can be brought to a high degree of correctness and accomplishment, even in the most common understanding."

13. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:31.

only one component of moral action. In addition to this type of awareness, one also needs to know how to *apply* the moral law, and this, we might think, requires a different set of skills. Part of applying the moral law in the correct circumstances involves being aware of what Barbara Herman has called “rules of moral salience.”<sup>14</sup> Rules of moral salience have the role of picking out certain aspects of situations “with the point of letting the agent see where moral judgment is necessary.”<sup>15</sup> The practice of moral deliberation would, in other words, be rather complicated were it not for the fact that we have the ability to locate the features of a situation that require moral attention. Thus, for example, the fact that a person asking for my help is wearing a blue shirt is not morally relevant, while the fact that she does not have the bus fare needed to get home might be. Herman observes that the rules of moral salience are usually “acquired in childhood as part of socialization” and that “when the rules of moral salience are internalized, they cause the agent to be aware of and attentive to the significance of ‘moral danger.’”<sup>16</sup>

Knowledge of such rules seems to be an important part of moral action, but some important caveats should be made about them. First, if the rules of moral salience are to be more than a list of memorizable empirical generalizations such as “kicking people in the shins tends to hurt them,” then knowledge of the moral law must *precede* knowledge of rules of moral salience. In order to know that a certain aspect of a situation is morally troublesome, the agent evaluating the circumstance must know the moral law. For me to even recognize that the pain inflicted by kicking people in the shins is morally salient, I already need to know that unnecessary pain is something that

14. Barbara Herman, “The Practice of Moral Judgment,” in *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 73–93, at 76.

15. *Ibid.*, 78.

16. *Ibid.*

people, generally, do not desire for themselves. And I need to know that it is morally problematic to act in a way that unnecessarily thwarts the ends that others set for themselves. In order to avoid the charge of question begging (or at least circularity), then, these rules must at least be “passed down” by individuals who are already aware of the moral law to those who have not yet fully developed the use of their reason. For this reason, Herman is right to cast rules of moral salience as something that we often learn as a part of childhood socialization.

Second, as Herman herself notes, rules of moral salience are not absolutely essential to the “formal system of judgment” of the categorical imperative.<sup>17</sup> In other words, as far as Kant is concerned, the fact that one was never “educated” in the rules of moral salience is no excuse for acting immorally. The discussion in the preceding paragraph gives us some sense of why this would be the case. Early exposure to rules of moral salience that morally developed individuals have already deduced would, indeed, seem to give agents a leg up on mastering their faculty of pure practical reason, but it also seems to be the case that knowledge of these rules would come hand in hand with a certain degree of intellectual and moral maturity. In the end, then, even if the rules of moral salience are an example of how learning about the moral law might be in some sense social, it is social in only a limited, and not entirely necessary, sense.<sup>18</sup>

And it is not just moral judgment that Kant sees as a fundamentally individual matter. Moral motivation is also something for which an agent has ultimate responsibility under Kant’s account. However, here Kant is perhaps a little more guarded; he acknowledges that the question of moral motivation is a dif-

17. Ibid.

18. Though as I will argue later in this chapter, the fact that we have a *duty to pursue the highest good* on this earth gives the rules of moral salience more relevance. Because of that duty, we have an obligation to pursue activities that will help catalyze our progress toward the highest good. An early education in the rules of moral salience is just one of those catalysts.

ficult one. In the Collins lecture, for example, Kant remarks, "Nobody can or ever will comprehend how the understanding should have a motivating power; it can admittedly judge, but to give this judgment power so that it becomes a motive able to impel the will to performance of an action—to understand this is the philosophers' stone."<sup>19</sup> Later, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant claims that the question of "how a law can be of itself and immediately a determining ground of the will (though this is what is essential in all morality) is for human reason an insoluble problem and identical with that of how a free will is possible."<sup>20</sup> Now, these might seem rather strange things for Kant to say, especially since, only a few pages after the latter claim in the second *Critique*, he goes on to give what looks like a fairly detailed account of how moral motivation might work under his account. But Kant's reservations here are not out of step with the account he goes on to give, since he assures us that the sketch he is about to give will not be able to show the "ground from which the moral law in itself supplies an incentive but rather what it *effects* . . . in the mind insofar as it is an incentive."<sup>21</sup> In other words, despite the fact that Kant thinks it will be impossible to demonstrate the precise mechanism through which understanding can influence the will, he will nevertheless be able to show us the visible effects of that mechanism.

Though Kant's most extended and detailed sketch of moral feeling occurs in the second *Critique*, he includes concise summaries of his view in other works. Among the more helpful of these is a note in the *Groundwork* where Kant remarks that

the most ordinary observation shows that if we represent, in the one hand, an action of integrity done with steadfast soul, apart from every other view to advantage of any kind in this world or another and even under the greatest temptations of need or allurements, it leaves

19. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:1428.

20. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:72.

21. *Ibid.*, my emphasis.



far behind and eclipses any similar act that was affected in the least by an extraneous incentive; it elevates the soul and awakens a wish to be able to act in like manner oneself.<sup>22</sup>

Kant's suggestion in this note—that awareness of the moral law and our obligation under it “elevates the soul” and creates a desire to act morally—is sketched in more detail in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In the third chapter of that work, entitled “On the Incentives of Pure Practical Reason,” Kant outlines the effects of the moral law “in the mind so far as it is an incentive.”<sup>23</sup> Again, Kant makes it clear that describing “how a law can be of itself and immediately a determining ground of the will” is an impossible task; the best he can do is to describe the effects that awareness of the moral law can have on sentiment. Kant claims here that once we are properly motivated by the moral law, we will naturally experience a feeling that makes it easier for us to continue to act morally. Kant calls this feeling “respect,” and it is a feeling that only sensible creatures like ourselves can experience. He admits that his account “presupposes the sensibility and so too the finitude of such beings on whom the moral law imposes respect.”<sup>24</sup> Holy wills, Kant argues, cannot experience this feeling, since they do not have our capacity for feeling.

In order to better understand this feeling of respect, it is useful to look at the story that Kant tells about how the feeling comes about. First, Kant says, “the moral law determines the will objectively and immediately in the judgment of reason.” This claim should, by now, come as no great surprise. Whatever story Kant eventually tells about how the moral law affects our sensibility, the first stage has to be an acknowledgement that—in the first instance at least—the moral law determines the will without any appeal to sensibility or objects other than the moral law itself. Next, Kant observes that our awareness of

22. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:111n.

23. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:72.

24. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:76.

the moral law “strikes down” self-conceit and “reigns in” self-love.<sup>25</sup> Here, Kant sketches the difference between self-love and self-conceit in the following way: “This propensity to make oneself as having subjective determining grounds of choice into the objective determining ground of the will in general can be called *self-love*; and if self-love makes itself lawgiving and the unconditional practical principle, it can be called *self-conceit*.”<sup>26</sup> According to this set of definitions, we can see why self-love would be “reigned in” while self-conceit would have to be “struck down” by the moral law. Self-love, so long as it operates according to the requirements of the moral law, can be consistent with the moral law. Self-conceit, on the other hand, seems to provide a new principle for action altogether.

As the moral law strikes down self-conceit and reigns in self-love, it also causes in us a feeling of pain and humiliation. As Kant puts it: “this restriction now has an effect on feeling and produces the feeling of displeasure which can be cognized *a priori* from the moral law.”<sup>27</sup> Kant continues to sketch the final stage of this process, pointing out that “inasmuch as it [humiliation] moves resistance out of the way, in the judgment of reason this removal of a hindrance is esteemed equivalent to a positive furthering of its causality. Because of this, this feeling can now also be called a feeling of respect for the moral law, while on both grounds together it can be called a *moral feeling*.”<sup>28</sup> And it is this feeling of respect that can—in future situations—motivate us to act morally. Indeed, its *only* object is the moral law. But at the same time, it is clear that Kant thinks that this feeling of respect only comes about once we have realized our obligation under the moral law without the aid of feeling or sentiment.

In sum, then, this review of Kant’s account of moral judgment and motivation should serve to remind us of a few impor-

25. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:73.

27. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:78.

26. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:74.

28. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:75.

tant facts as we continue this investigation. First, it is strictly speaking the case that Kantian agents should be able to reason about moral decisions and morally salient features of decisions by themselves. Second, Kantian agents do not need an external source of moral motivation; they do not need to be “conditioned,” for example, through education, to be motivated to act morally. And these facts yield a crucial claim about moral responsibility within Kant’s system. Specifically, an agent’s moral successes and failures are attributable only to that agent. Again, this seems to pose a problem for a theory, like mine, that argues that we have a duty to pursue certain institutions in order to further moral progress. How can we have such a duty, if the individual components of moral progress—the decisions that agents make—are the kinds of things that only those agents have control over?

In the next sections, I present an answer to this worry. In what follows, I sketch an account of Kantian agency that takes into account the social influences that have an effect upon an agent’s moral character. In particular, I pay close attention to the ways in which our social relationships can influence the way we reason about moral decisions and the ways we can be motivated to act morally. Though these relationships and influences are by no means necessary for Kantian agency, they make virtue more likely. And when we recall that we have a duty to pursue those activities that bring about progress toward the highest good, these character-influencing relationships take on a central importance within Kant’s own theory.

### *Kant’s Account of Moral Character*

We turn, then, to an account of what a Kantian moral character might look like. In her account of concept, G. Felicitas Munzel correctly argues that Kantian character cannot simply be understood as a kind of collection of repeated moral actions. Es-

tablishing a certain habit in one's actions is probably enough for, say, an Aristotelian account of character, but it is not enough for Kant.<sup>29</sup> Given Kant's strict requirements about the sources of moral knowledge and motivation, character will have to be something that is more closely related to pure practical reason. Thus, Munzel suggests we adopt the sketch of character that Kant gives in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, namely that of a "mode of thinking," or *Denkungsart*.<sup>30</sup> This mode of thinking is consciously developed out of a recognition of the requirements of morality; it is, according to Kant, a "pre-disposition [that] indicates what [a person] is prepared to make of himself."<sup>31</sup> And, as we will see in the latter half of this book, Kant's notion of a mode of thinking, or *Denkungsart*, describes quite nicely the kind of capacity that is often developed when we participate in certain social institutions. So, for example, participation in a republican government will have the effect of training our mode of thinking so that we are more able to think for ourselves. And being a member of a "moral friendship" will train our mode of thinking so that we are able to assess our own virtue and moral shortcomings more effectively.

So, how should we characterize this mode of thinking and the kinds of activities that aid in its development? First, as emphasized above, it must always be the kind of thing that is—at some point—under our rational control. In other words, a Kantian "mode of thinking" cannot be a product of mere habit or conditioning, no matter how often it happens to come to the "right" conclusions. But this is not to say, either, that a Kantian "mode of thinking" is one that the agent is always aware of, or aware of employing. Rather, it is most accurate to say that the

29. G. Felicitas Munzel, *Kant's Conception of Moral Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

30. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, trans. Robert Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Ak 7:285.

31. *Ibid.*

agent develops this mode of thinking in response to her awareness of her responsibilities under the moral law. An agent who develops this mode of thought does so in response to her already formed awareness of duty, and in response to her awareness that developing these habits will aid her in her responsibilities.<sup>32</sup>

It may, perhaps, be useful to outline some examples of the kinds of habits of reasoning that agents develop as part of a mode of thinking. I do not take this list to be comprehensive, though I do think it captures many of the habits that Kant implicitly refers to, especially within his discussions of the social institutions under discussion in this book. First, then, we can easily see how one might consciously develop a mode of thought that is not easily distracted by inclination or moral “red-herrings.” Perhaps, for example, we recognize that we have developed a sort of implicit bias against certain groups of people. Perhaps we judge them too harshly, or perhaps we even fail to give them the respect due to any moral agent. A Kantian agent should not want only to avoid these moral failings, but—more to the point—she should want to make a concerted effort to eradicate the mistakes that she makes in her reasoning so that she does not make these kinds of moral mistakes in the future. Thus, the Kantian agent might actively pursue objective input and assessment about the prejudices she might not notice in herself. And our agent needn’t seek the help of a professional or online questionnaire—as we will see in chapter 4, Kant actually thinks friendship is a particularly useful relationship in this vein. Friends who feel at ease and open with each other have the unique ability to point out these kinds of moral missteps to one another. Indeed, we

32. An exception here might be the case of early childhood education. As I show in chapter 3, Kant thinks that moral education ought to begin well before an agent is able to reason about the requirements of the moral law. But there, as I argue later, Kant’s suggestions are focused for the most part on *preventing* certain habits from getting a foothold. In these cases, we might say, the educator has a responsibility to prevent the child’s “mode of thinking” from developing in a way that makes further character development difficult.

will see that, for this reason, Kant actually thinks that this fact gives us a kind of duty to seek out these kinds of relationships.

Second, a practiced Kantian mode of thinking will be more adept at noticing morally salient facts and being attuned to “moral danger,” in Herman’s terminology. A Kantian agent who strives to be virtuous should not want only to make the right individual decisions; she should also want to train herself to notice those features of her moral landscape that indicate such moral danger. Now, perhaps we might think, this sort of thing is clear enough and doesn’t require any added training. And again, there is some truth in this fact. When faced with a moral choice, an agent with the capacity for pure practical reasoning should be able to reason correctly. But surely, most of our moral lives are not most aptly described as incidents in which a moral choice or problem *presents itself to us*. Much of what is required of us as agents—especially if we are agents tasked with bringing about a kind of ethical community—is a kind of *seeking out* of moral problems. In this respect, especially, knowledge of the rules of moral salience (not to mention knowledge of facts about the world one inhabits) become a crucial part of this process.

Finally, there is a sense in which Kant’s moral theory requires a certain amount of moral imagination from its agents. This is especially apparent when we think of Kant’s repeated insistence that we think from the standpoint of others, for example. A Kantian “mode of thought,” then, will be characterized not just by the bad habits it avoids and its capacity to locate moral danger, but also by its capacity to actively engage in this kind of imagination. Though we might be able to put ourselves in another’s shoes from time to time, the capacity to think from the standpoint of others consistently (let alone to remind ourselves to do this) requires practice and a certain level of engagement with others. Perhaps of all the elements of the Kantian “mode of thinking,” this one depends most on the social relationships we engage in.

But, as we saw above, the capacity to reason morally is only half of the story when it comes to Kant's (allegedly) individualistic account of agency. On the strict account presented above, properly moral motivation is closely connected to moral choice and thus certainly not the province of social influence or shaping. In what follows, however, I argue that—just as our mode of thought might be shaped by the relationships we engage in—so too can our motivation be affected by these interactions. Much of the mechanism of this social shaping will have to do with the extent to which our relationships can have an influence on our sympathies and inclinations—which in turn can make a difference in our moral motivation. I turn to that account in what follows.

Barbara Herman, Marcia Baron, and Paul Guyer have all presented some version of the view that desires and inclinations are the kinds of things that can be shaped by our awareness of the moral law.<sup>33</sup> Herman has recently provided a precise sketch of how desires and dispositions might be rationally shaped by the moral law.<sup>34</sup> According to Herman, desires themselves are the types of things that are actually responsive to reason. That is, it is a mistake to think of emotions and desires as essentially opposed to reason and, as a result, unable to be informed by reason. Herman argues for this reason-responsiveness by presenting what she calls a “natural history of desires,” showing how our early desires (for example, those of thirst and hunger) transform into desires with objects.<sup>35</sup> This transformation, Herman argues, “takes place in an environment regulated by a wide range of evaluative concepts. . . . The desire itself be-

33. See, e.g., Marcia Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost without Apology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995); Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Barbara Herman, “Making Room for Character,” in *Moral Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1–28.

34. Herman, “Making Room for Character.”

35. *Ibid.*, 14ff.

comes socialized.”<sup>36</sup> Now, it is important to emphasize that in the course of being socialized, these desires are at best only accidentally transformed into desires that square with the moral law. Herman’s point is not, then, that over the course of early development, our desires become shaped by pure practical reason. If this were her claim, it would seem to be a rather un-Kantian one, since the source of this shaping would not come from our own awareness of the demands of pure practical reason, but rather from some form of external coercion. Her claim at this point is the more limited claim that by being “socialized,” desires become the kind of things that are susceptible to reasoned evaluation and, ultimately, reasoned shaping.

Because they are reason-responsive, Herman argues, these desires can enter what she calls the “deliberative field.” It is at this point that desires are evaluated according to how well they fit the requirements of the moral law. Herman argues that “when and to the extent that agents have desires that have evolved in a reason-responsive way, the incentives themselves are open to further, more principled rationalization.”<sup>37</sup> If these already reason-responsive desires pass the scrutiny of the moral law, then Herman says, it becomes easy to see how the motive of duty might become “dispersed.” Once desires that are reason-responsive to begin with have passed through the deliberative field, they are, in a sense, imbued with the motive of duty. The motive of duty, then, is not something that simply occurs on isolated occasions when the morality of an action is in question. Rather, it is something that is a part of all of our desires, so long as they have been through this process.

As is evidenced by Herman’s account above, one key virtue of the reason-responsive account is that it helps us avoid the view that the Kantian agent is faced with a constant struggle between desire and reason. On a mistaken account like this,

36. *Ibid.*, 15.

37. *Ibid.*, 20.



Kantian agents are portrayed as being filled with desires that tend to *compete* with what the moral law requires of them. A virtuous person, then, is just someone for whom the strength of the moral law is in some sense stronger than the strength of her natural desires. Accounts that treat the Kantian relationship between desire and morality as a kind of “balance of forces” thus tend to lead to charges of moral alienation or “moral schizophrenia.” A state of moral alienation occurs when a person’s most deeply held desires and projects are, in a sense, constantly being overpowered or vetoed by the requirements of morality. Or, as Michael Stocker puts it, “moral schizophrenia [consists of] a split between one’s motives and one’s reasons.”<sup>38</sup>

It is perhaps easy to see how that balance-of-forces view could gain popularity. The view that decisions are made as a result of weighing competing desires (or desire-like forces) is one that appeals to many, perhaps, because it is one that fits with the prevailing belief/desire model of action. However, it is also an account that does not accommodate the Kantian theory of action particularly well, and when we try to force the Kantian view into its rubric, we should not be surprised to find results that are both mysterious and unsatisfying.

But if the picture of moral motivation in Kant is not one of balancing moral and nonmoral forces against each other at every moment of moral choice, how else could we describe it? Two points stand out in response to this question. The first is that the Kantian agent is best described not as the passive locus of competing forces, but as an active moral agent.<sup>39</sup> In the “Doctrine of Virtue,” Kant describes the life of the moral agent as one characterized by “being one’s own *master*,” “*ruling*

38. Michael Stocker, “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories,” *Journal of Philosophy* 73, no. 14 (1976): 453–466, at 454.

39. See, for example, Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*: “What is crucial in [Kant’s] account of self-mastery is his emphasis on ourselves as active agents rather than passive effects of the ordinary forces of nature” (349).

oneself,” and “subduing one’s affects and *governing* one’s passions.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, those who would cast Kant’s theory as a “balance of forces” view are still thinking of moral motivation as just another desire-like vector pulling on us. But this is precisely the notion that Kant’s account of the moral law and moral motivation is meant to reject. The claims of morality are, for the moral agent, not just another “interest group”—they are supremely governing.

This emphasis on self-mastery and discipline brings us to the second respect in which the Kantian picture of moral motivation is importantly different from the “balance of forces” account. Kant’s theory is not one that concerns itself, first and foremost, with individual actions and individual choices. Rather, as the passage above suggests, and as Marcia Baron has noted, “the more appropriate Kantian focus is on conduct, viewed over a stretch of time and guided by reasons.”<sup>41</sup> Barbara Herman has cast this distinction in terms of so-called primary and secondary motives.<sup>42</sup> Primary motives, according to Herman, are those motives most immediately associated (in a temporal sense) with our actions. Not surprisingly, then, there can be a great deal of variation with respect to the kinds of motives that count as primary motives. So, for example, my motivation for helping a person in need might include a feeling of sympathy for that person, just as it could be a feeling of civic-mindedness that encourages me to help fellow citizens. Secondary motives, on the other hand, are those motives that limit or constrain primary motives. Despite their name, however, there is a sense in which secondary motives are much more central to the Kantian story of moral motivation. They tell us

40. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:407.

41. Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost without Apology*, 190.

42. Barbara Herman, “On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty,” in *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 14–15.

what kinds of primary motives we can develop within the limits of the moral law. We might develop certain attitudes and sympathies in order to motivate us on certain occasions, but our development of these attitudes will be both motivated and sanctioned by awareness of secondary motives.

But in describing this distinction between primary and secondary motives, it is crucial to note that we should not think of secondary motives as simply providing a “back-up” or “fail-safe” morality for our everyday, primary motives.<sup>43</sup> That is, the correct picture of primary and secondary motives is not one in which we simply shape and pursue various desires, and then, when necessary, call on secondary motives as a corrective or limiting force. The problem with such an account is that it would be difficult to see how we would know when to employ these limiting secondary motives if they weren’t already part of our motivational structure. For this reason, it is more accurate to think of primary and secondary not as two parallel systems, or of secondary motives as serving as a kind of fail-safe, but rather as two parts of one motivational system. Specifically, we should think of primary motives as, in a sense, stemming from secondary motives. Primary motives will be those motives that we develop in consultation, as it were, with the secondary motives.

Two observations about Kant’s moral philosophy support the thesis that Kant’s main concern is not with primary motives and individual actions, but rather with courses of conduct and secondary motives. First, the focus on secondary motives helps us move away from the implausible view that our awareness of the moral law intervenes mysteriously each time we make a moral choice. Or, as Barbara Herman has put it, that moral motivation must be a “miracle every time.”<sup>44</sup> The prob-

43. Ibid., 128. See also Nancy Sherman, “Reasons and Feelings in Kantian Morality,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60, no. 2 (1995): 369–377, at 376.

44. Herman, “Making Room for Character,” 11.

lem with such a view is not just that moral motivation seems to “come from nowhere,” but that it seems to come from nowhere with such regularity. Such a view seems at best explanatorily unhelpful and at worst simply implausible.

The second observation about Kant’s moral philosophy that argues in favor of this account of secondary motive is a metaphysical one. Kant’s most mature thought about moral choice in the *Religion* is one that describes our moral choice as a single choice to subordinate the maxim of self-love to the moral law (or vice versa).<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Kant thinks of this choice as something that occurs outside of time on the noumenal level.<sup>46</sup> Thus, to speak of a Kantian agent making a moral choice *on many particular occasions* seems not to reflect Kant’s most developed thought on moral action and motivation. Kant’s account in the *Religion* gives us some reason to think that the kind of “choice” we make need not bear a resemblance to reasoned decision making as we know it.

Given the sketch of moral choice as existing outside of time and concerning the maxims and courses of conduct the agent chooses, we are now in a position to reevaluate the claim that moral motivation must be a mysterious, individualistic event that occurs whenever we make a moral choice. Certainly it is true that, at the level of forming secondary motives (that is, those motives that guide courses of action), the standard analysis of motivation as having its source in pure practical reason alone stands. But even when we keep this point in mind, there is still room for an account of how we might develop our emotions and dispositions into a kind of moral character that is motivated to act from duty.

It is from this observation that the discussion of the role

45. Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Ak 6:36.

46. This fact may actually suggest that it is misleading to think of this choice as a “single choice” since notions of time are out of place with respect to the noumenal.

of moral character in Kant's ethics can begin. Once we have observed that Kant's requirements about the purity of moral motivation do not necessarily exclude an affective component, we can begin to tell a story about how certain affective states and dispositions might be cultivated in order to ensure that a person's character is as moral as possible. And it is in shaping a person's character in this way that social institutions and relationships can play an important role. So, for example, when we educate children, we may have in mind the task of instilling in them a kind of sympathy for their fellow humans, and when we discuss (as Kant suggests we do) difficult moral cases with them, we cultivate in them a disposition to be interested in morality and to think carefully about its requirements. Similarly, when we participate in civic life, we develop in our character a disposition that is more able and more likely to think from the standpoint of others and be moved by their claims when making moral decisions.

Indeed, some claims that Kant makes suggest that developing this kind of moral character is not just an option within his moral theory, but actually a duty in and of itself. So, for example in the "Doctrine of Virtue," he repeatedly refers to the process of cultivating one's character in the manner described above as a duty: "This duty can therefore consist only in *cultivating one's faculties* (or natural predispositions), the highest of which is *understanding*, the faculty of concepts and so too of those concepts that have to do with duty. At the same time this duty also includes the cultivation of one's *will* (moral cast of mind), so as to satisfy all the requirements of duty."<sup>47</sup> This passage is primarily noteworthy in its insistence that agents develop their "moral cast of mind," or *sittlicher Denkungsart*, as described in the opening paragraphs of this section. But Kant also asserts in the "Doctrine of Virtue" that we have a duty to

47. *Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:387.

develop our naturally occurring sympathies. In a famous passage, Kant tells his readers that agents actually have an obligation to seek out the kinds of experiences that will naturally help develop these sympathies.

While it is not a duty in itself to share the suffering (as well the joys) of others, it is a duty to sympathize actively in their fate; and to this end it is therefore an indirect duty to cultivate the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feeling in us. . . . It is therefore a duty not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to found, but rather to seek them out, and not to shun sickrooms or debtors' prisons and so forth in order to avoid sharing painful feelings one may not be able to resist.<sup>48</sup>

Kant's example of "sickrooms" and "debtors' prisons" provides evidence that he thinks we can develop our naturally occurring sentiments and dispositions so that they might help us perform the duties that the moral law requires of us. And just as we ought not shun debtors' prisons and sickrooms, we ought also not isolate ourselves from our community and the institutions that exist within that community that can also help us develop our "moral cast of mind." Indeed, in these passages at least, Kant is willing to go as far as saying that we have a *duty* to pursue these kinds of experiences and relationships, precisely because we have a duty to develop a moral character. But given Kant's rigorous claims about moral responsibility outlined in the first part of this chapter, how can we now make sense of these claims about our duty to develop our character?

### *A Duty to Develop Character?*

Even in the "Doctrine of Virtue," Kant does seem at times to hint at the stricter interpretation of his theory of moral choice and motivation. At one point he observes that "to strive with all

48. Ibid., Ak 6:457.

one's might that the thought of duty for its own sake is the sufficient incentive of every action conforming to duty."<sup>49</sup> In other words, while an agent's community might have a role to play with respect to understanding various rules of moral salience and developing one's moral sympathies, these components are, strictly speaking, not *essential* to Kant's theory of moral choice and motivation. These features of an agent's moral life may in fact make it easier for him to be moral, but it is nevertheless the case that their absence from an agent's life can never serve as an excuse for failing to act morally. In other words, then, the truly essential components of Kant's theory are just those atomistic components described at the outset of this discussion.

It is in response to just such concerns that the discussion in the previous chapter about the ethical community becomes important. It is, strictly speaking, true that these parts of an agent's life only make it easier for him to be moral. But, of course, when we consider the fact that the ultimate object of Kant's most mature formulation of his moral theory is an ethical community, realizable on this earth and not in an afterlife, features that make moral progress easier suddenly take on a new importance. If it were the case that Kant's most mature theory held (as did his earlier thought) that moral perfection and the happiness it warrants were possible only in an afterlife, then it would seem that these observations about character would be little more than an interesting observation about how an agent's morality is realized in the short time he exists on this earth. But if we take a fuller view of Kant's theory, and see it as one that is actually concerned with realizing its ends in this world, then the features that help bring about this end become an essential component of the theory. If, as Kant says, we have a duty to bring about the highest good, and if the highest good is understood as an ethical community, then we have an obligation to pur-

49. Ibid., Ak 6:393.

sue those relationships that will allow us to build the character traits and habits of thought that will bring this community about more quickly. As Kant says in the passage quoted above, we have an “indirect duty” to pursue these kinds of activities.<sup>50</sup> But what does Kant mean when he claims that we have this kind of indirect duty? Specifically, how does such a duty compare to other, more oft-discussed duties in the Kantian corpus?

Kant’s most frequent references to the idea of an indirect duty occur in the context of his claim that we have this kind of indirect duty to pursue our own happiness, since being unhappy can be a temptation against doing one’s duty. In the “Doctrine of Virtue,” Kant argues that “adversity, pain, and want are great temptations to violate one’s duty,” and so we have a duty to see to our own happiness. But, he warns us, “to seek prosperity for its own sake is not directly a duty, that of warding off poverty insofar as this is a great temptation to vice. But then it is not my happiness but the preservation of my moral integrity that is my end and also my duty.”<sup>51</sup>

From the passages cited—especially those about pursuing one’s own happiness—it seems that Kant characterizes duties as indirect if they are not immediately commanded by duty (and indeed sometimes seem contrary to duty), but nevertheless aid us in achieving our duties. As Jens Timmermann puts it, indirect duties are “*per se* morally neutral acts because they are not immediately made *necessary* by the moral law. They simply help us to realize our morally worthy ends.”<sup>52</sup> Indirect duties, on this definition, are not duties immediately commanded by morality—as is the case with perfect duties to avoid dishonesty

50. Ibid., Ak 6:457.

51. Ibid., Ak 6:388. See also *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:399, where Kant admits that “to assure one’s happiness is a duty (at least indirectly); for, want of satisfaction with one’s condition . . . could easily become a great temptation to transgression of duty.

52. Jens Timmermann, “Kant on Conscience, ‘Indirect’ Duty, and Moral Error,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2006): 293–308, at 299.



and theft, for example. But indirect duties are not just imperfect duties, either. Imperfect duties, though in some sense not commanded by duty in the same strict sense as perfect duties, still require what we might think of as “morally laden” action. Giving to charity and perfecting one’s talents are not, according to the Kantian sketch of dutiful action, actions that are morally neutral. In order for an action to be considered an indirect duty, it must be an action done in the service of one of these other (direct) duties, whose performance in other circumstances would be of no moral import. As Timmermann puts it elsewhere:

Direct duties generate “indirect” duties when actions that are as such morally neutral become a matter of moral obligation by virtue of being required as a means to a moral end. “Indirect” duties are generated by technical rules in conjunction with an obligatory end, not by a categorical moral imperative. For instance, when as an act of beneficence you fill in a cheque to Oxfam you do not obey a “duty to fill in a cheque.” . . . The connection between the end commanded by duty and the means is merely contingent.<sup>53</sup>

Kant’s conceptual distinction between direct duties and indirect duties seems fairly straightforward. As we are embodied creatures, any number of actions will take on some kind of moral significance when done in the service of a duty that is required of us. But it also seems as though morally neutral actions might actually become direct duties in circumstances in which they are the *only* way to fulfill a duty that is required of us. Timmermann, for example, claims that a pilot can be said to have an indirect duty to stay sober.<sup>54</sup> This seems like a strange claim for several reasons. First, it is perhaps a poor choice of example, since staying sober is, otherwise, not a morally neutral concept for Kant. We have a duty to ourselves to avoid drunkenness generally.<sup>55</sup> But Timmermann’s point seems to

53. Jens Timmermann, “Kantian Duties to the Self, Explained and Defended,” *Philosophy* 81 (2006): 505–530, at 506n.

54. *Ibid.*, 506.

55. *Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:427.

be that there is nothing explicitly contained in the obligation to transport passengers safely, or not put them at unnecessary risk, that says anything about avoiding drunkenness. This is something we must add, so to speak, from knowledge about our empirical situation.

But if even a pilot's staying sober can count as an indirect duty, one wonders if the class of *direct* duties isn't then just limited to the four that Kant presents in the *Groundwork*. In any given case, we will need to add information about our empirical situation in order to derive specific duties from these abstract duties. It seems, then, that indirect duties, unless they describe one of many ways to fulfill a duty, simply turn into a fully specified account of the actions necessary to fulfill one's duty in the empirical world we inhabit.

Ultimately, however, any disagreement here might simply reduce to a terminological point. It is certainly the case—as we will see in the following chapters—that our empirical limitations give rise to duties to pursue certain activities that might otherwise be considered morally neutral. But it is also important to point out, at least, that something's being an indirect duty does not make it *optional* in every circumstance. When we fulfill a duty of beneficence, we might practice any number of indirect duties—we might fill out a check, or donate clothing or time. In this case, there is some flexibility in these indirect duties. In other circumstances, however, there will not be this flexibility, and in those cases, we might say that we have an indirect—though nonoptional—duty to stay sober when flying an airplane or driving a car. Similarly, when we consider our obligation to pursue the highest good, we will come to realize that our empirical circumstances actually dictate other nonoptional duties—for example, the duty to educate children morally and seek out a “moral friendship.”

In summary, then, we have seen that it is possible to view Kant's account of moral action from the perspective of several

different vantage points. In the first instance, we can—as Kant himself so often does—simply think of moral choice in terms of the individual choices an agent is responsible for making. Kant’s account of moral agency suggests that an agent will require few tools other than her own reason in order to act morally. But we can also look at moral action from the vantage point of character. Kantian agents do not simply make isolated moral choices. Indeed, Kant’s moral theory gives us foundational reasons to think that it is more appropriate to think of Kantian agency in terms of a person’s character—and this notion of character can refer to *both* the habits of thought that the agents engages in *and* the kinds of sympathies and desires that the agent rationally develops in order to aid in her moral choice and motivation. Still, even when we expand our view to include this account of moral character, Kant’s account of moral responsibility seems to hold firm. We can, in other words, tell sophisticated stories about what makes moral action more likely, and we can tell these stories in a way that is entirely consistent with Kant’s account of moral agency. But, even from the vantage point that includes a discussion of character, these stories will only be stories about what makes moral action more likely. They cannot be understood as prerequisites for moral action, and a person’s lacking these experiences can be no excuse for moral failure.

However, when we remember that Kant tells us that we have a duty to pursue a kind of ethical community as the manifestation of the highest good, then these facts about what makes virtue more likely do, in fact, take on an added importance. Because we have a duty to bring about the highest good, we have what Kant often calls an indirect duty to engage in those activities that help bring about the highest good, or ethical community. And, more to the point, there are some activities that are uniquely suited to developing our moral characters in this way. These activities—discussed in the remaining chapters of this book—should be considered indirect, but nonoptional, duties.

3

MORAL EDUCATION  
AND MORAL PROGRESS



IN THIS CHAPTER, we make a transition. The previous chapters have laid the foundation for a study of institutions that help bring about moral progress and the highest good. We have seen that Kant's most mature and consistent conception of the highest good describes the end of morality as being achievable within a community of agents in the course of human history. We have also seen that a full understanding of Kant's theory of moral action makes room for, and indeed requires, an account of character. This fact about moral character will be especially important to keep in mind during the following discussion of moral education, since much of what Kant proposes in his system of education is intended to shape a moral character in developing agents.

Of course, there is a kind of tension between Kant's model of moral agency and his claims about the importance of his philosophy of moral education. Understanding this tension—and how it can be resolved with reference to Kant's theory of the highest good—will be central to understanding the argument in this chapter. On the one hand, Kant's account of moral knowledge and decision making seems to be one that can be self-taught. Kant's famous categorical imperative and related fact of reason argument suggest that we can learn the content and the application of the moral law on our own. So, for example, the fact that an agent never received a specially tailored moral education will never serve as an excuse for wrongdoing. On the

other hand, Kant has a sophisticated and detailed account of moral education that goes well beyond the kind of education a person would receive in the course of ordinary childhood experience. And, as we will see, Kant was deeply concerned with pedagogy; his “moral curriculum” includes specific advice about how to foster a moral character at each stage of childhood development. This fact seems to run counter to our initial observations about the Kantian agent’s knowledge of the moral law and his ability to be motivated by such knowledge. Indeed, it suggests that Kant thought that agents require a kind of formal education in learning and applying the moral law.

Ultimately, we can make sense of these seemingly conflicting claims if we focus not only on the individual moral decisions that Kantian agents make, but also on the goals or ends that these moral decisions are intended to achieve. As we have seen, in Kant’s case, this end is the highest good, understood as a kind of ethical community. Seen as a tool to bring about and sustain the highest good, Kant’s philosophy of education becomes an essential part of his moral philosophy. It is, in other words, not enough simply to hope that individual agents will make decisions that lead to the highest good. We must pursue institutions that are more likely to further our progress toward that end. And, unsurprisingly, a system of education like the one that Kant suggests is just such an institution. Indeed, I conclude this chapter by arguing that these observations lead us to conclude that Kant’s moral philosophy includes a duty of education.

In order to demonstrate the crucial role of education within Kant’s practical philosophy, this chapter will begin with an examination of the historical context into which Kant’s philosophy of education fits. This section includes a discussion of the kinds of education available to children in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including a brief description of Kant’s own early education. Following this, I will examine

two philosophers whose pedagogical theories had a great influence on Kant's own theory—John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. I examine these philosophers not just to give an idea of where Kant may have gleaned some of his ideas, but also to show how Kant compares with these philosophers on a crucial foundational question of education, that of the natural state of the child. Though Locke, Rousseau, and Kant are similar in some of their recommendations for education, they differ on questions concerning the innateness of moral knowledge and the natural goodness of the child. Understanding how Kant compares to his predecessors will help us better understand the specific methodological recommendations that Kant makes with respect to education, as well as how Kant's pedagogical theory plays an essential role in his broader practical philosophy. Specifically, I will argue, given Kant's claims about the natural state of the child, his recommendations regarding education play a crucial role in bringing about the highest good. And since we have a duty to pursue the highest good, we also have a duty to provide children with the kind of moral education that helps us move closer to this goal.

Following the examination of historical context in the first section, the second section of the chapter examines the details of Kant's account of moral education. This section outlines the various stages in a Kantian moral education, and demonstrates that a child who has received such an education will, in some sense, have a deeper appreciation for his own freedom and the freedom of others. Such a child will, as a result, have developed a moral character that is more likely to make moral decisions and be motivated by the moral law. Finally, a child educated in the kind of system that Kant recommends will be one who finds a kind of joy in the moral law and reasoning about the moral law. All of these facts, of course, make Kant's system of education an important component in bringing about the highest good.

*Historical Context**Education in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries  
and Kant's Own Education*

In the context of the kinds of education available to children in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Kant's own philosophy of education is rather innovative. Despite the fact that these centuries saw enormous advancements in science and culture, this forward-looking attitude was certainly not reflected in the educational practices of the time. Indeed, in many respects, education had not changed significantly since the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> For most middle-class children, the best option was the traditional Latin school, where students would, as the name suggests, sit through hours of Latin instruction, perhaps supplemented by some form of religious instruction. Heavy emphasis was placed on memorization and repetition. Unsurprisingly, no effort was made to make learning enjoyable for children. Little or no time was devoted to letting children socialize with one another, and there was no curriculum for developing a child's virtue or citizenship beyond whatever lessons were dogmatically presented to them in the course of religious instruction.

Kant's own education as a youth in Königsberg also gives us a detailed insight into the kinds of educational opportunities open to middle-class children at this time. From Easter of 1732 to late 1740, Kant attended the Collegium Fridericianum. The Fridericianum was a pietist school where religious introspection was emphasized, and children followed a rigorous academic schedule that served to "break the natural willfulness of the child."<sup>2</sup> In various respects, however, the Fridericianum

1. F. Andrew Brown, "On Education: John Locke, Christian Wolff and the 'Moral Weeklies,'" *University of California Publications in Modern Philology* (1952): 149–170.

2. A. H. Francke, quoted in Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 53.

was relatively progressive for its time. Despite its overarching religious mission, the founders of the Fridericianum thought it equally important that students gain knowledge of the world.<sup>3</sup> Students were separated into classes according to their ability in various subjects and were taught by teachers who specialized in particular subjects. In addition, subjects that were typically absent from the Latin school curriculum, such as geography and history, were taught. Finally, some efforts were made to allow students to take classes that would be relevant to their future careers. And though they were segregated from their male counterparts, the Fridericianum allowed girls to study at the school as well.

Despite these innovations, however, a typical day for the children at the Fridericianum would try the intellectual and physical endurance of an adult. Older children would be expected to get out of bed for morning prayers at five in the morning (younger children were apparently allowed the luxury of an extra hour of sleep). Beginning at seven, students would begin classes that lasted until four or five in the afternoon, followed by several hours of homework. Subjects included theology, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, history, geography, church history, and calligraphy. In addition, students who were interested could participate in French instruction or singing lessons on certain days of the week. Classes would always begin with a prayer, followed by extensive review of material from previous lessons.

Though students were allowed regular exercise during the day (typically two to three hours, depending on the season), there seems to have been little opportunity for socialization among students. Even at lunchtime, a teacher would read something "useful" aloud to students, and evenings were occupied with prayers and homework for the following day. And as Manfred Kuehn points out in his biography of Kant, a class

3. Heiner F. Klemme, *Die Schule Immanuel Kants* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1994), 63.



schedule that divided children according to their ability (as opposed to their age, for example) did not promote friendships among students.<sup>4</sup>

Kant's memories of the Fridericianum were, on the whole, rather negative. Though he developed some friendships at the school, his recollections of the curriculum were not fond. One friend of Kant's reported that even though Kant was fortunate enough to live at home during his school years, he would be "overcome" with "terror and fear" upon thinking about "the slavery of his youth."<sup>5</sup> And Kant himself expresses a similar sentiment in his anthropology lectures, when he remarks that "nothing damages genius more than imitation" and that the schools, which force children to "learn Latin phrases by heart," are responsible for the lack of genius in children.<sup>6</sup> As we will see in the next section, Kant's own philosophy of education might, in many respects, be seen as a kind of response to the childhood training that he received. Kant would come to see education as an institution that had more imminently practical goals than the memorization of Latin phrases. For Kant, education was instead an institution that could help children develop moral characters, and thus become citizens of a kind of ideal community. To this end, Kant insists that children be allowed to experience their freedom (to the extent that it does not interfere with others' freedom), and he endorses social interaction in order to develop an understanding among students that others, too, experience and value this sense of freedom. In all

4. Of course, as bleak as this picture of middle-class education may seem, students like Kant were certainly more fortunate than their counterparts in the lower classes. These children often received no formal education at all. When they did, it was at *Volksschulen*, where the curriculum consisted of reading, writing, and memorization of religious catechism (see Brown, "On Education," 151).

5. Hippel, quoted in Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography*, 45.

6. Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Anthropology* in *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 25 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and predecessors, 1902-), Ak 25:385. Quotations from Kant's anthropology lectures are my own translations.

of these respects, Kant will reject the education he received as a child in favor of one that treats the child as a child, and functions in the service of the wider community.

An exception to these examples of education was perhaps found in the German *Ritterakademien*, which were intended to train the sons of nobility for their future lives in the courts. Here, it seems, more emphasis was placed on what we might call “social skills,” though it seems this curriculum did not emphasize the subjects of virtue or citizenship, but rather concerned itself with what Kant would call “teaching gallant manners and the art of currying favor.”<sup>7</sup> And though these schools seem to have inspired some philosophers, including Leibniz and Christian Thomasius, in their writings on education, the majority of critics complained that these schools were characterized by a lack of intellectual rigor and that, as a whole, “their most distinguishing characteristic as a class . . . seems to have been ignorance.”<sup>8</sup> Kant himself, if he had an opinion of these schools, would most likely have disapproved of their chosen curriculum. Though these schools emphasized social interaction (for Kant, a crucial component in developing a moral character), Kant would probably have disapproved of their emphasis on manners and custom. As he explains in his anthropology lectures, an early emphasis on manners and currying favor tends only to weaken a child’s character and make it impossible for him to be capable of anything “sublime or magnanimous” later in life.<sup>9</sup>

In general, then, the state of education in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seems to have been lagging behind contemporaneous advances in science and culture. Though the existence of *Ritterakademien* in Germany suggests some innovation in terms of curriculum, these schools were open to

7. Ibid, Ak 25:726.

8. Brown, “On Education,” 150.

9. *Lectures on Anthropology*; Ak 25:726.

only a select few students, and their innovations in curriculum still failed to teach students to be virtuous, or how to be good citizens. It is this failing of education in particular that Locke, Rousseau, and Kant were concerned with.

*Locke and Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1692)*

Though he is perhaps best remembered for his writings on epistemology and political philosophy, John Locke's most popular work in his time was his discussion of education entitled *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*.<sup>10</sup> In it, Locke rejects the ideals of the typical Latin school and instead insists that the goal of education should be a practical one—learning to be a virtuous person and, as a result, a good citizen. Much of Locke's suggested method for teaching these practical subjects, especially virtue, can be attributed to his rejection of innate ideas. Locke imagines that "the minds of children [are] as easily turned this or that way as water."<sup>11</sup> In other words, as far as Locke is concerned, children are not born knowing how to be virtuous or how to be good citizens. By the same token, Locke does not imagine that children are born with morally corrupt characters, either. Though there might be children who are more stubborn or obstinate than others, for the most part, Locke attributes childhood misdeeds to parents and tutors and their unintentional "downright teaching of vice."<sup>12</sup>

So for Locke, the goal of education is to teach students something they do not know innately—how to be virtuous. But Locke is not content just with teaching students how to display virtue outwardly; he also wants to teach students to have a *love* of virtue. In order to achieve this, Locke suggests putting to use those characteristics that children do possess innately—

10. References are to John Locke, *The Educational Writings of John Locke*, ed. James Axtell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

11. *Ibid.*, 115.

12. *Ibid.*, 140.

“reason, understanding, sensation, memory, desire for pleasure and aversion to pain”—in order to bring them to the love of virtue.<sup>13</sup> Because of his emphasis on our shared and innate desire for pleasure and aversion to pain, it may sound as if Locke has in mind some kind of conditioning, in which children are taught by use of physical force to be virtuous. But in fact Locke, like Kant, sees physical punishment as a kind of last resort, to be used only on exceptionally “obstinate” children.<sup>14</sup> For the most part, Locke thinks that a real love of virtue can best be shaped by appealing not to a child’s aversion to physical pain, but to his reason. Of course, here we should understand “reason” quite broadly, since nowhere does Locke suggest actually sitting down with a young child and reasoning from first principles. Nor, Locke insists, should we fill a young child’s head with rules to memorize.<sup>15</sup> Rather, when Locke speaks of appealing to a child’s reason, he seems to have in mind a practice that both teaches through example and is “suited to the child’s capacity and apprehension.” In young children, this simply means that children “must be treated as rational creatures” by their parents and tutors. Parents should, in other words, always act for a reason when they deal with children, and never do anything out of “[capriciousness], passion, or fancy.”<sup>16</sup>

Kant was clearly familiar with Locke’s thoughts on education. In addition to important theoretical similarities that run throughout Kant’s pedagogical theory, Kant mentions Locke’s philosophy of education specifically in his anthropology lectures, when he cites with approval Locke’s suggestion of mak-

13. John Yolton, “Locke: Education for Virtue,” in *Philosophers on Education*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (New York: Routledge, 1998), 175. As we will see below, Kant also has an account of how we might bring pupils to have a love of virtue, and of reasoning about moral philosophy in general. The Kantian agent, however, must be careful to limit this feeling to a love of virtue, and to not let it become a feeling of moral enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*).

14. Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 177.

15. *Ibid.*, 157.

16. *Ibid.*, 181.

ing children wear shoes that let in moisture so that they do not become too accustomed to comfort or a life of ease.<sup>17</sup> Kant admired Locke's suggestion as a way to "harden" children, and compares him in this respect to Rousseau. Nevertheless, Kant does not cite Locke's philosophy of education with the same frequency as he does Rousseau's. There are several possibilities for the source of Kant's familiarity with Locke. First, there is the chance that Kant could have read *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* in translation. Given the book's popularity in England, this would not be altogether surprising, especially since the first German translation of the piece appeared as early as 1708.<sup>18</sup> And even if Kant himself never read the entire text, it is likely that some of Locke's thoughts on education were passed down to him through Christian Wolff, whose own ideas on education seem to bear a resemblance to Locke's.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Locke's ideas certainly influenced Johann Basedow and the Philanthropists, whose movement of educational reform Kant was interested in.<sup>20</sup> And finally, Locke's philosophy of education was in a certain sense "in the air" during Kant's life—various popular publications, called "moral weeklies," avidly promoted Locke's ideas on education to their readers.

However Kant may have become familiar with Locke's philosophy of education, his own writings on pedagogy bear striking resemblance to Locke's on some crucial points. To begin with, Kant clearly shares Locke's sympathies about the purpose of education. Though Kant makes recommendations from time to time about how to teach subjects such as geography and history, his main concern when it comes to education is that students learn to be moral. Beginning with his insistence that in-

17. *Lectures on Anthropology*; Ak 25:726.

18. Brown, "On Education," 153.

19. *Ibid.*, 154–161.

20. See Kant's "Essays Regarding the Philanthropinum" in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Anthropology, History and Education*, trans. Robert Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

phants and young children be “hardened” so that they are less likely to fall prey to moral weakness, and through his detailed account of moral catechism, Kant is always concerned with creating moral characters and good citizens. Kant’s own experience at the Fridericianum almost certainly led him to agree with Locke about the relative uselessness of the Latin school curriculum when it came to such an educational goal.

Locke and Kant also agree about the natural state of the child. Though Locke is certainly more explicit in his insistence that children are not innately moral, Kant, too, seems to think that children are not by themselves able to make moral decisions that adults can be expected to make. Thus, in the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant explains that “when children destroy something useful, it cannot be imputed to them, because they know not what they do.”<sup>21</sup> Kant explains that children “know not what they do” because they have not yet learned the “subjective conditions of freedom.” In other words, children—because they do not have fully developed rational capacities—do not understand what the potential consequences of their actions are or, for that matter, how to revise their maxims based on an awareness of potential consequences. Part of normal human development, certainly, involves coming to understand such ideas. But Kant, in his insistence on a kind of social education for young children (and in his suggestion of allowing older children to reason about “hard cases”) also seems to understand that all agents can use as much practice as possible in coming to understand and utilize these kinds of ideas.

There is another, perhaps different, sense in which Kant seems to think that virtue is not innate. This is the sense in which virtue—understood essentially as a kind of character trait—is allowed to develop only after a series of encounters between our inclination and our awareness of the moral law. Kant

21. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:291.

expresses this kind of idea in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, where he explains that “the very concept of virtue already implies that virtue must be acquired . . . . For a human being’s moral capacity would not be virtue were it not produced by the *strength* of his resolution in conflict with powerful opposing inclinations. Virtue is the product of pure practical reason as it gains ascendancy over such inclinations with consciousness of its supremacy (based on freedom).”<sup>22</sup> This passage is worth emphasizing, since it suggests that a lack of knowledge about the “subjective conditions of freedom” is not the only thing that stands between young children and a virtuous character. Rather, virtue requires a kind of training in which the moral agent repeatedly practices individual moral actions in an effort to develop a virtuous character. Kant’s account of moral education, then, not only introduces children to the “subjective conditions of freedom,” knowledge of which is required for moral action. It is also meant to develop virtue in this second sense—by allowing children and young adults to develop a character out of repeated exposure to the demands of morality.<sup>23</sup>

*Rousseau and Education according to Nature*

It can be difficult at times to piece together a detailed account of Rousseau’s philosophy of education. *Emile*, the book in which much of Rousseau’s thought on the matter appears, is certainly not intended to be read as a manual, but rather as a kind of novel with a moral. Thus, for example, even if Rous-

22. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:477.

23. It is worth noting, however, that a crucial difference between Locke and Kant concerns the role of religion in education. For Kant, moral education must precede religious education. For Locke, the two are more closely linked. Locke’s Fundamental Law of Nature, and thus the virtues that children learn, are based in religion. The “foundation” of virtue, and a notion that “ought very early to be imprinted on [the child’s] mind,” is that of God (241). For Kant, morality must precede religion—both in its foundations (i.e., in the sense that moral precepts are not voluntaristic commands) and, as a result, in how the subjects are taught.

seau did think that raising children individually and apart from society was an ideal situation, he no doubt realized how impractical such a suggestion would be. Nevertheless, Rousseau's suggestions in *Emile*, regardless of how impractical they are or how seriously they can be taken, point to a philosophy of education that is importantly different from Locke's in many respects, and yet still highly influential on Kant's own pedagogical theory.

Rousseau's main premise in his philosophy of education is a version of the same thesis that is repeated throughout his political philosophy—society (in the developed form we are acquainted with) has a corrupting influence. That is, Rousseau pins evil not on original sin, or some other natural predisposition, but on society's influence—specifically, its tendency to make us depend on one another and, ultimately, seek superiority over one another.<sup>24</sup> This means two things: first, that education—if it is done the wrong (usual) way, can be especially corrupting, since it takes an uncorrupted child who is by nature “good” and essentially infects him or her with the evils that arise out of inequality. But it also means that the education of children is a unique opportunity to change the course of history. Indeed, for Rousseau, perhaps the best way to accomplish a change in the course of human events is to start early, with education, before the negative influences of society get ahold of children.

Briefly, what this means for Rousseau's philosophy of education is that it will start from a very different premise than both Locke's and Kant's accounts. Rousseau denies the claim that children are essentially moral blank slates. Instead, as Rousseau puts it in the oft-quoted opening line of *Emile*, children, like everything else, are “good as [they] leave the hands

24. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or, On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979). 85: “Dependence on men, since it is without order, engenders all the vices, and by it, master and slave are mutually corrupted.”



of the Author of things.”<sup>25</sup> This, in turn, implies a kind of “education according to nature.” The lessons that Rousseau’s pupil learns in the early years of his life will be lessons that he learns from the natural world around him, not from society.<sup>26</sup> He will learn what kinds of limits nature puts on his freedom, and become an independent and self-sufficient person. Of course, we might reasonably wonder how much of Emile’s education is really simply “according to nature,” since his tutor seems to be arranging all the appropriate encounters with nature throughout his education.<sup>27</sup> The important point, however, and one that can be extracted from the novel as a piece of real pedagogical advice, is that Emile (like any child) is innately moral and is corrupted by precisely those social mechanisms that Locke (and later Kant) suggests. Certainly, for example, Emile is not to be influenced by a desire for his parents’ esteem or a fear of disgrace when he makes decisions. Of course, eventually, Emile has to enter into society, but this will occur only after his reason has developed sufficiently and he has had the appropriate education from nature.

Though Kant rejects the idea that children ought to be educated according to nature alone, Kant is still in many respects sympathetic to Rousseau’s claim that the roots of injustice and inequality are largely social. As we saw in chapter 1, Kant expresses his sympathies with Rousseau on this point in his discussion of our tendency to seek superiority over each other in the *Religion*. Like Rousseau, Kant thinks that a tendency to compare ourselves to others is at least part of the cause

25. Ibid., 37.

26. See *ibid.*, 92: “Up to the time when the guide of *amour-propre*, which is reason, can be born, it is important for a child to do nothing because he is seen or heard—nothing, in a word, in relation to others; he must respond only to what nature asks of him, and then he will do nothing but good.”

27. Take, for example, Rousseau’s carefully engineered lesson in property, in which Rousseau arranges for Emile to plant beans in a field just before the soil is tilled (*ibid.*, 98–100).

of human evil.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, there are important distinctions between Kant and Rousseau on this point. For one thing, even though Kant sees the root of evil as social, he doesn't agree with Rousseau that we are inherently good before we enter into society. Kant thinks instead that we "graft" our maxims onto tendencies that are otherwise morally neutral.<sup>29</sup> These natural predispositions include our predispositions toward animality (which includes our drive toward self-preservation and reproduction), humanity (our rational capacities), and personality (our moral capacities). How these predispositions develop is, again, a matter of the choices we make. So, for example, in the lectures on pedagogy, Kant asks himself "whether the human being is by nature good or evil." He answers that "he is neither of the two because by nature he is not a moral being at all; he only becomes one when his reason raises itself to the concepts of duty and of law."<sup>30</sup> And in the anthropology lectures Kant reiterates this disagreement with Rousseau when he explains that "man is an animal, who requires discipline, without which he grows up to be not unlike a wild animal, and this is where Rousseau makes a mistake, when he believes that discipline flows from the nature of man."<sup>31</sup>

Because of this initial disagreement about the natural state of the child, Kant and Rousseau take different paths when it comes to how social education should be. Since Rousseau's child is naturally good, and corrupted only by the negative influence of society, his suggestion, in general, will be to keep Emile away from society for as long as possible. Only after Emile has learnt to be self-sufficient will he be slowly introduced to society. For Kant, on the other hand, social interaction will be a key aspect

28. Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Ak 6:27.

29. Ibid.

30. Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Pedagogy*, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Anthropology, History and Education*, trans. Robert Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Ak 9:492.

31. *Lectures on Anthropology*, Ak 25:447.

of a child's education. Many of Kant's recommendations for a child's moral education have to do with exposing the child to social situations, and instilling in him an appreciation of the freedom of others. As Allen Wood, among others, points out, Kant recognizes that the source of evil is (in part) social, and seems to conclude that the solution must therefore also be social.<sup>32</sup> Rousseau suggests the opposite solution. The only way to solve an inherently social problem according to Rousseau is to remove the child from society for as long as possible.

### *Kant's Philosophy of Education*

Biographical evidence suggests that Kant was both deeply involved with and interested in education. Kant himself had decades of experience as an educator. After he finished his studies at the University of Königsberg, Kant worked as a household tutor for seven years. In addition to some forty-three years of continuous lecturing at the university, he was actively involved in the promotion of the Philanthropinum, a school in Dessau whose principles were based largely on Rousseauian ideals of education. Indeed, at one point, Kant remarks that education is "the greatest and most difficult problem that can be given to the human being."<sup>33</sup>

Kant's discussions of pedagogy appear primarily in his lectures on pedagogy, transcribed at Kant's request by his student and (later) colleague Friedrich Theodor Rink. Kant's original notes are long since lost, and there has been considerable debate about the content and organization of Kant's lectures as transcribed by Rink.<sup>34</sup> For example, the lectures on pedagogy

32. Allen Wood, "Religion, Ethical Community and the Struggle against Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 17, no. 4 (2000): 498–511. Also see Anderson-Gold, *Unnecessary Evil*, 46.

33. *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Ak 9:446.

34. For example, Traugott Weisskopf, *Immanuel Kant und die Pädagogik* (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1970).

refer to the demise of Philanthropinum, which occurred in 1794, seven years after Kant last lectured on pedagogy in 1787. The lectures seem to be a compilation of some of Kant's notes on pedagogy and anthropology, along with some of Kant's notes on *Emile*. And many of the ideas that appear in the lectures on pedagogy appear in other texts, including the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, and in Kant's notes and lectures on ethics and anthropology.

Because of the relative lack of organization of some of Kant's writings on education, there is some disagreement among commentators about how best to divide the stages of Kant's philosophy of education.<sup>35</sup> This discussion follows Kant's own division of the stages in his lectures on anthropology.<sup>36</sup> There, Kant divides the stages of education into four stages, grouped in pairs under the headings of "negative education" and "positive education." Negative education includes first, Kant's recommendations for the nurture of infants and young children and second, a stage that Kant calls discipline. Positive education includes first, a stage that involves civilization and cultivation, as well as a final stage called moralization.

### *Negative Education*

The first part of education, under which the substages of "nurture" and "discipline" fall, Kant refers to as negative education, and sometimes as physical education. In several of Kant's lectures on anthropology, Kant credits Rousseau for promoting this type of education, but he also criticizes Rousseau for essentially limiting his account of education to this stage.<sup>37</sup> Negative education is, then, characterized by the fact that the child is essentially being taught *not* to be beholden to

35. For a detailed discussion of the ambiguities in Kant's terminology, see Robert Louden, *Kant's Impure Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 38–40.

36. *Lectures on Anthropology*, Ak 25:723.

37. *Ibid.*, Ak 25:447.

various inclinations and to change his “animal nature into human nature.”<sup>38</sup> And, if inclinations should get a foothold in the child, it is in the stage of negative education that the educator ought to pursue various means to eradicate these habits.

The first stage of negative education, nurture, begins with Kant’s suggestions for the care and safekeeping of infants. Kant includes in this discussion various observations about how warm a child ought to be kept and the kind of milk (animals’ vs. mother’s) a baby ought to drink. Kant also recommends against swaddling children and instead argues for the use of an *aruccio*, or “a kind of box which is covered with straps on top.”<sup>39</sup> According to Kant, this method of holding babies is superior to swaddling since it allows the child the free use of its limbs. Restricting the child’s movement, Kant argues, makes the child “fearful.” Indeed, Kant thinks, any one of us would recoil at the idea of being bound. “Just let a grown human being be wrapped up,” he says, “and then see whether he does not also scream and fall into anxiety and despair.”<sup>40</sup> Though Kant’s suggestions about nutrition and clothing might seem quaint, this observation gives us a hint of things to come. Throughout Kant’s thought on education, he consistently emphasizes the fact that the child must be allowed to experience his or her freedom (and, later, become aware of others’ freedom). Swaddling a child would, it seems, rob an infant of a very basic experience of freedom.<sup>41</sup>

Kant’s first stage of nurture also includes important suggestions about how to prevent various inclinations from get-

38. *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Ak 9:441.

39. *Ibid.*, Ak 9:459.

40. *Ibid.*, Ak 9:458.

41. Of course, having the free use of one’s limbs is not the same kind of freedom as being able to set ends for oneself, or, for that matter, being able to guide one’s action with a law that one gives to oneself. But these abilities are, naturally, beyond the capacities of an infant. Kant’s concern seems just to be that we give the child the experience of freedom that is appropriate to its stage of rational development.

ting a foothold in the child. A key element of Kant's remarks on nurture is the idea that the child should not become accustomed to a life of ease, lest it become spoiled. Thus Kant warns against immediately running to a crying child, both because this is bad for the child (apparently crying is a kind of exercise for children) and because it "is usually the first undoing of the child, for [the child] sees that everyone rallies at its cries, then it repeats its cries more often."<sup>42</sup> As a result, such capitulation allows a "tyrannical" and "demanding" character to form in the child.<sup>43</sup> In addition, Kant argues against the use of artificial devices such as "leading strings" that would have been used in order to help teach children how to walk.<sup>44</sup> Instead, in his lectures on anthropology, he commends the English for allowing their children to run around like farmers' children, since this has the effect of making children more dexterous.<sup>45</sup> In general, Kant's view is that making accommodations, whether by capitulating to a child's demands or by using artificial devices such as leading strings, tends to soften a child's disposition and make him accustomed to a life of ease.

But perhaps the most telling piece of advice that Kant has in this stage is a related one: Kant is adamant that children not be allowed to develop habits. He explains that "the more habits someone has, the less he is free and independent. It is the same with the human being as with all other animals: they always retain a certain propensity for that to which they were accustomed early."<sup>46</sup> Similarly, he explains in the anthropology lectures that "man becomes softened through the conveniences of life."<sup>47</sup> As we have already seen, Kant admires Locke's suggestion of letting children's feet get wet, and in the same passage

42. *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Ak 9:459.

43. *Lectures on Anthropology*, Ak 25:723.

44. *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Ak 9:461.

45. *Lectures on Anthropology*, Ak 25:664.

46. *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Ak 9:463.

47. *Lectures on Anthropology*, Ak 25:684.

he cites Rousseau's claim that a child who is correctly raised will be raised in much the same way that a peasant is, with no attention paid to comfort and the social mannerisms of adults, but rather to developing a hardened disposition.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Kant suggests that giving children a hard bed is more advisable than letting them sleep in a soft one.<sup>49</sup> However, Kant does not agree with Locke and Rousseau that children should be accustomed to nearly everything. He doesn't agree with their suggestion, for example, that children should be denied a regular meal schedule.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, he argues, "one risks too much if one tries to accustom children to everything."<sup>51</sup> Kant's concern is not to raise children who can handle whatever circumstances life may hand them. Rather, his concern is to ensure that children do not develop a disposition that is unduly influenced by inclination and the promise of ease. Nor is the idea behind this regimen to keep children from establishing specific inclinations that may tempt them away from morally worthy choices. I doubt, for example, that Kant is terribly concerned about the prospect of our choosing a comfortable bed over dutiful action. Rather, Kant is concerned that we begin shaping in children a character or disposition that is not drawn away from duty for the sake of comfort or because it has simply established a habit that would conflict with performing one's duty for the sake of duty. Furthermore, a child whose disposition has not been "softened" through "convenience" will also be more likely to understand that the world is not constructed in such a way that we can always expect our desires to be satisfied.

48. Rousseau's suggestions with respect to avoiding the formation of habit seem to border on the obsessive: "Do not carry [the child] on one arm more than the other; do not accustom him to give one hand more than the other; to use one more than the other, to want to sleep, eat, or be active at the same hours, or to be unable to remain alone night or day" (*Emile*, 63).

49. *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Ak 9:464.

50. *Lectures on Anthropology*, Ak 25:684.

51. *Ibid.*

And, as noted earlier, there is also a sense in which Kant wants to ensure that children are able to experience their freedom—to the extent that this is possible at any given developmental stage. We have already noted Kant's insistence that children not be bound or swaddled. In other places in the lectures on pedagogy, Kant reiterates this concern with freedom. So, for example, he says that "the child must be allowed to be free in all matters," except where this use of freedom might injure himself or others.<sup>52</sup> Later, Kant asserts that the "child must always *feel* its freedom."<sup>53</sup> Kant's insistence on allowing children to experience their freedom is related to two important goals. First, it will be crucial that the child appreciates the value—so to speak—of her own freedom. And, in this vein, the formation of habits that detract from the child's experience of her own freedom is of particular concern. Second, an appreciation of one's freedom will be essential later in a child's life, when we formally introduce the moral law to the pupil. It will be easier for the child to understand the duties she has to herself and others if she has had this experience of her own freedom and, in a certain sense, understands the value of such a capacity.

But knowledge and appreciation of freedom will generally not be sufficient, according to Kant, to ensure the development of a mature, moral character. Kant points out that on this point he disagrees with Rousseau, whom Kant cites with having a "noble propensity toward freedom."<sup>54</sup> In other words, Kant thinks that a complete account of education will have to include some discussion of discipline, or the limiting of freedom. Kant provides such an account of discipline next.

Negative education continues in a second stage that Kant calls discipline. Kant explains that this stage involves a "restriction of lawless freedom"<sup>55</sup> and "changes animal nature

52. *Ibid.*, Ak 9:454.

54. *Ibid.*, Ak 9:442.

53. *Ibid.*, Ak 9:464, my emphasis.

55. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:467.



into human nature.”<sup>56</sup> And since, as Kant puts it, “the human being is not immediately in a position to do this, because he is a raw state when he comes into the world, others must do it for him.”<sup>57</sup> Crucially, it is during this stage of discipline that the child first learns to “feel [the] constraint” of “the laws of humanity.”<sup>58</sup> Of course, the constraint that children feel when being disciplined is importantly different from the constraint that (we hope that) they will later feel in giving the law to themselves. But Kant’s view seems to be that we cannot wait for children to develop into mature rational agents before we introduce them to this sense of constraint. In the first place, even children are able to interfere with the freedom of others (and, for that matter, their own freedom), and this must somehow be limited. But, second, there is also a sense in Kant’s writing that one cannot wait too long to introduce notions of constraint and discipline. Discipline, Kant says, “must . . . happen early.”<sup>59</sup> So, for example, he argues that we do not send children to school (at first) with “the intention that they learn something there, but rather that they may grow accustomed to sitting still and observing punctually what they are told.”<sup>60</sup>

Discipline, then, involves teaching children both to delay gratification, resist impulse and inclination, and avoid interfering with the freedom of others. This stage will naturally involve some corrective punishment, but Kant suggests that physical punishment be used as little as possible. Instead, he suggests a kind of “moral punishment,” in which we “[harm] the inclinations to be honored and loved.”<sup>61</sup> Best of all, Kant thinks, is the kind of punishment that he calls “natural punishment,” in which the child’s punishment is simply the direct and natural result of his misdeed.<sup>62</sup> In all of these cases, of

56. *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Ak 9:441.

58. *Ibid.*, Ak 9:442.

60. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*, Ak 9:483.

57. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*, Ak 9:482.

course, we are dealing with some form of coercion or another; the child is never really doing anything for the sake of duty (nor should we expect the child to be capable of this). But Kant prefers the latter methods of punishment because he thinks that physical punishment alone leads to a servile disposition.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, parents and teachers should avoid shaming the child, or comparing him to others.<sup>64</sup> This, it seems, will only lead to a shy and fearful character that is overly concerned with the approval of others.<sup>65</sup> The idea behind Kant's recommendations is to bend the spirit, not to break it.<sup>66</sup>

Also interesting to note at this stage is Kant's claim that the best way to educate children about the inevitable restrictions on their freedom is to do so in a group of other children. Rather than teaching in isolation as Rousseau suggests, Kant seems to think that the ideal way to convey the crucial idea that the use of our freedom can conflict with others' use of their freedom is to teach this lesson in practice. Thus, Kant argues, "public education has its obvious advantages, because by means of it one learns both to measure one's powers, [and] one learns restrictions through the rights of others. Here no one enjoys any advantages because one feels resistance everywhere."<sup>67</sup> Of course, any child who comes into contact with other individuals will learn that her freedom will inevitably come into conflict with others' freedoms. But a child who receives a "public" education will have this point made palpably clear well before she reaches the age at which she can begin making moral decisions. In addition, Kant thinks that this kind of public education has the added benefit of guarding against the errors in reasoning that are passed down within families. "Quite often," Kant points out, "domestic education not only frequently brings forth family mistakes but also reproduces them."<sup>68</sup> In

63. *Ibid.*, Ak 9:482.

65. *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Ak 9:465.

67. *Ibid.*, Ak 9:455

64. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:437.

66. *Ibid.*, Ak 9:479–480.

68. *Ibid.*, Ak 9:453.

educating children “publicly,” we ensure that they are exposed both to a variety of ideas and—most importantly—to the fundamental fact that we must limit our freedoms in order to live in society with one another.

It is worth pausing at this point to examine some of the “lessons” that Kant’s pupil learns in the stage of discipline. Indeed, we might equate these lessons with some of the “subjective conditions of freedom” that Kant thinks children must acquire before they can be considered to be fully responsible moral agents.<sup>69</sup> As we saw earlier, these “subjective conditions of freedom” include knowledge about both our own moral capacities and various empirical facts about the world we inhabit. One piece of knowledge, it seems, has already been introduced (and remains to be emphasized)—in the stage of nurture, Kant wants children to become aware of the fact that they are free and to value their freedom. Of course, it is important to emphasize that the kind of freedom that children enjoy and value is not the kind of freedom that Kant claims is of ultimate value, for example, in the *Groundwork*. Rather, it is an early analogue of and necessary precursor to humanity.

In the stage of discipline, it seems, several other crucial pieces of information about the “subjective conditions of freedom” are introduced. First, the pupil learns that other people are also free creatures who value their freedoms. She also learn that her own use of freedom can and will often come into conflict with the freedom of others. Again, a pupil will become especially well acquainted with these facts if she is educated among a group of other children. Finally, children will learn that they have the capacity to restrict the use of their freedom when this is necessary to accommodate others’ freedoms or the future use of their own freedom. Again, this is not to say that children have—at this stage—developed the capacity to

69. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:291.

revise their own maxims or restrict their ends based on their own recognition of the moral law. This capacity will develop only later. But children will learn that they are capable of denying their inclinations. And when we think of Kant's recommendations for education as making suggestions about how to develop a character that is more likely to act virtuously, we can certainly see how knowledge of these facts will be crucial. A person, for example, who has never (or rarely) had the experience of limiting the use of her freedom (even if such limitation is initially coerced), will have difficulty developing a moral character that acts out of respect for others' freedom and the ends that they set.

### *Positive Education*

Following the stage of discipline, Kant's pupil proceeds to the first stage of "positive" education, the stage referred to as cultivation. Instead of merely keeping various inclinations under control, the student in this stage begins to learn lessons about how to accomplish a particular task. The stage of cultivation involves teaching "the procurement of skillfulness,"<sup>70</sup> and is perhaps what most of us think of when we think of education; it involves teaching various physical, mental, and intellectual skills such as agility, reading, and writing.<sup>71</sup> Of course, it is useful to note that there will naturally be some overlap of negative and positive education in a child's life. So, for example, a child sitting in a classroom will perhaps be learning how to write, or sharpening his memory, while at the same time conditioning his will to be accustomed to work. Insofar as we are concerned

70. *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Ak 9:449

71. *Ibid.*, Ak 9:467. This stage even includes lessons, for example, in physical tasks such as swimming. Kant cites with approval Benjamin Franklin's suggestions for teaching children how to swim: "Drop an egg into a brook in which you are standing on the bottom, with at least your head out of the water. Now try to seize the egg. In bending over, your feet will come up . . . and you are in the proper position for swimming" (Ak 9:466).

with the positive educational task of cultivation, however, we are concerned with teaching children how to accomplish various ends that they set for themselves—or will, eventually, set for themselves.

Kant seems to make a further division in this stage: in the first instance, students learn various intellectual and practical tasks such as writing, speech, memory, foreign language, and history. But most importantly, this stage involves developing the capacities of judgment, understanding, and reason in the pupil. This means, in other words, that students need to acquire “knowledge of the universal,” as well as “application of the universal to the particular.” And finally, they will learn the “connection of the universal with the particular.”<sup>72</sup> Kant also suggests at this point that students learn such lessons as learning to distinguish fact from opinion and accepting delayed gratification. Kant also has some ideas for the method of teaching these lessons, though he is remarkably open to experiments in education.<sup>73</sup> In general, he thinks, the best way to develop these capacities is to practice them by combining them with other kinds of education. “In the instruction of children,” he argues, “one must seek gradually to combine knowledge and ability.”<sup>74</sup> Kant continues by claiming that mathematics is especially well suited to this kind of practical application, but other subjects lend themselves to application as well. So, for example, Kant suggests that when a student “quotes a universal rule, then one can have him cite cases from history and fables in which the rule is disguised.”<sup>75</sup> And when it comes to teaching languages, Kant suggests that students learn the language by using the language in conversation. In all cases, Kant reminds us, “One must occupy the memory only with those things which for us are important . . . in real life.”<sup>76</sup> Thus Kant warns against

72. Ak 9:472.

74. Ibid., Ak 9:474.

76. Ibid., Ak 9:473.

73. E.g., *ibid.*, Ak 9:451.

75. Ibid., Ak 9:472.

giving children novels to read, since “novel-reading weakens the memory” and fails to exercise the child’s thought.<sup>77</sup>

In a second part of cultivation, the student learns what Kant in some places calls civilization or discretion. At this stage the pupil learns how to conduct himself in society or how to use his “skillfulness effectively” or “how to use human beings for [his] purposes.”<sup>78</sup> Kant sometimes calls this process “civilization” and it includes lessons in manners and custom, aspects of which will “conform to the changeable tastes of each age.”<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, Kant also suggests that this stage of education involves teaching “propriety,” which Kant defines as “the art of external appearances.”<sup>80</sup> The child should, of course, not be taught to be dishonest; but he should be taught how to “hold back one’s faults” and make oneself “impenetrable.”<sup>81</sup>

It may seem on the face of it that statements like these are rather un-Kantian. It may perhaps seem odd that part of a Kantian education involves learning how to use others to one’s own ends, or, for that matter, learning how to project a certain image in the company of others. But, in itself, this doesn’t pose a real problem, since Kant’s famous prohibition is only against using others *merely* as a means to an end. And it is important to keep in mind that what sets us apart as rational beings is that we are able to set ends for ourselves. To a large extent, lessons in civilization, then, have to do with exercising one’s freedom to promote one’s own ends, and, ultimately, learning how to best promote others’ ends.

Indeed, within the stages of cultivation and civilization, it seems that Kant’s pupil learns or internalizes several additional facts that ultimately constitute the “subjective conditions of freedom.” Specifically, it is in these stages that the Kantian pupil begins to understand that she has a capacity for humanity,

77. Ibid.

79. Ibid., Ak 9:450.

81. Ibid.

78. Ibid., Ak 9:486.

80. Ibid., Ak 9:486.

or an ability to set and pursue ends, rather than simply a freedom to (for example) move around unimpeded. And this is not the only piece of valuable information that the Kantian pupil internalizes at this stage. She also learns—in the process of civilization—that others have this capacity to set and pursue ends as well, and that at times others can be instrumental in helping to bring about the ends that she sets for herself. (Conversely, of course, she also learns that she can be instrumental in bringing about the ends of others.) Of course, any agent who does not grow up in complete isolation will, eventually, come to realize these facts. But, again, it seems that Kant has engineered his suggestions for education so that these lessons can come across clearly. Far from just being the stage in which pupils learn how to behave in society, or how to read and write, cultivation and civilization appear to be the crucial stages in childhood education during which pupils become aware of their capacity to set and pursue ends and of how this capacity is both helped and hindered by that same capacity in others.

The fourth and final stage in Kant's sketch of education is a stage he calls moralization. Though it is the stage that bears the name of Kant's overall goal, it is only the conclusion of a long process of shaping the pupil's character. As we have seen, throughout his account of education, Kant is concerned with developing character traits in children that will ultimately make this kind of moralization easier. When nurturing children, the Kantian educator has made every effort to keep pupils from developing habits. And in disciplining children, the educator has demonstrated to them that they are capable of resisting inclination. In addition, Kant makes some suggestion that before the stage of moralization begins, the parents and educators of young children should be careful about the way they present certain morally laden "facts" about the world. So, for example, Kant tells us that children should not be "allowed to notice" inequalities among people, nor should they be allowed

to act with these inequalities in mind. Children cannot, for example, be allowed to give orders to servants.<sup>82</sup> Eventually, then, the child can be taught that “the inequality of human beings is an institution which has arisen because one man has tried to obtain advantages over the other.”<sup>83</sup>

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant suggests an “erotetic” (from the Greek “to question”) method of education for the stage of moralization. But students should not be allowed to launch into a full-scale debate about moral issues before they have first learned a solid foundation of principles, so Kant divides the stage of moralization into a stage of moral catechism preceding a later stage of questioning and dialogue. In the initial stage of moral catechism, students participate in hearing and reciting moral principles. However, even in the stage of catechism, Kant seems to want to avoid a kind of didactic method of education. Rather, it is best to “draw out” principles using a kind of Socratic method.<sup>84</sup> The fact that the Kantian educator is able to draw moral principles out of his students should probably come as little surprise. After all, as we have already seen, their development up until this point has essentially given them all the tools, or facts, they need to piece together some basic Kantian principles. They know, for example, that they are capable of setting ends and that others are capable of this, too. They also know that they value this capacity and that others can both aid and hinder their pursuit of ends (and vice versa). The task of the educator who presents students with a moral catechism, then, is to help students essentially “connect the dots” and arrive at the basic tenets of the moral law. (Kant’s teacher asks the student, for example, whether one should grant people their every wish, or if it ever occurs to him whether he is worthy of happiness.) And once the educator has

82. Ibid., Ak 9:498.

83. Ibid.

84. *Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:479.



drawn moral principles out of his students, Kant says, it can be useful for those students to write these principles down for later reference.<sup>85</sup>

One should note, however, that though Kant uses the word *catechism* in the “Doctrine of Virtue,” he is opposed to the idea of using religion to teach moral principles. There are two reasons for this. The first has to do with a person’s motivation for moral action. An action cannot be properly done from the motive of duty if it is done out of a fear of eternal punishment, and Kant probably thinks that instilling this kind of fear in children at an early age is inimical to the goal of having children develop a morally worthy character. Second, as he himself puts it, “it is only by pure moral principles that a transition from the doctrine of virtue to religion can be made, since otherwise the professions of religion would be impure.”<sup>86</sup> Since, as we saw in chapter 1, faith must, for Kant, be based on an initial recognition of the moral law and its requirements, mixing religion with a purely moral catechism would be as detrimental to the purity of religion as it would be to the independence and purity of the moral law.

After the stage of catechism, Kant allows students to participate in a dialogue about casuistical questions and historical examples. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant notes how easily people from any walk of life fall into discussion about moral worth. Even “those for whom anything subtle and refined in theoretical questions is dry and irksome soon join in when it is a question of how to make out the moral import of a good or evil action.”<sup>87</sup> Kant wonders why it is, then, that “educators of young people have not long since made use of this propensity,” and suggests that this kind of dialogue be used in order to sharpen students’ powers of thinking and judging.<sup>88</sup>

85. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:479.

86. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:478.

87. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:153.

88. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:154.

Here, Kant also discusses the use of examples with respect to this stage of learning. Examples can be useful, he concludes, so long as they are used correctly. For one thing, we should not use examples of supermeritorious actions, since these examples of “inaccessible perfection [produce] mere heroes of romance who, while they pride themselves on their feeling for extravagant greatness, release themselves in return from the observance of common and everyday obligation.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, such supermeritorious examples tend only to make students strive for the unattainable, while neglecting the real “dry and earnest representation of duty.”<sup>90</sup> Also with respect to the use of example, it is important that students not see examples as something to simply imitate. After all, a student who acts according to the moral law simply because he is imitating someone else’s action is not making a free choice to act out of duty. Instead, the use of example should serve “only as proof that it is really possible to act in conformity with duty.”<sup>91</sup>

In general, then, there are several goals that the instructor hopes to achieve in the stage of moralization. First, the teacher needs to ensure that students know what is contained in the moral law. A second goal of moralization is that students’ powers of thinking are sharpened, so that they may be better able to make moral judgments in the future. Finally, it seems Kant wants to instill in students a kind of positive attitude toward moral-decision making. He explains that “it is natural for a human being to *love* a subject which he has, by his own handling, brought to a science . . . and so, by this sort of practice (in moral judgment), the pupil is drawn without noticing it to an *interest* in morality.”<sup>92</sup> It should be noted, however, that this love of virtue is a distinct concept from Kant’s notion of moral enthusiasm, or *Schwärmerei*. The pupil who has come to love the virtue that he “has brought to a science” still understands

89. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:155.

91. *Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:480.

90. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:157.

92. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:484.

the limitations that the moral law places upon him. Indeed, in some sense, this is the very thing that the pupil loves. An individual overcome by moral enthusiasm, on the other hand, believes himself to have transcended these limitations. He “flatters” himself, thinking that he has a “spontaneous goodness of heart.”<sup>93</sup> His enthusiasm leads him to think that his sympathies will always lead him to act morally. Certainly, Kant would not want his pupils to embrace this attitude.

*Education and Kantian Moral Philosophy—  
Potential Worries*

In this section, I address two potential concerns that we might have about the role of education in Kant’s moral philosophy. Each of these concerns centers around a potential conflict between moral education and our freedom as moral agents to make decisions concerning our actions. We will see that, especially with respect to the second of these concerns, Kant’s concept of the highest good provides us with an answer to this apparent conflict, and, furthermore, helps to demonstrate the centrality of a system of education in Kant’s ethics.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, worry we might have is that the moral education that Kant describes is inappropriately “coercive” for a moral philosophy with such a focus on free choice and responsibility. A major premise of Kant’s practical philosophy is that we are not bound by the laws of nature to act in mechanically predictable ways. What separates us from the rest of nature in this respect is that we have the capacity to make free choices about our actions. This means that human beings, at least in their capacity as rational animals, operate in a different realm than the rest of nature. We are not bound by the forces of nature to act in predictable ways. Instead, we can make free

93. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:85.

decisions about which course of action to take. Indeed, moral choices are characterized by exactly this feature: we are able to separate ourselves from our empirical conditions and the inclinations they suggest and act on a law that our reason recognizes.

The problem that arises when we consider Kant's philosophy of education, however, is that it seems, at least on the face of things, to compromise on this fact of freedom by suggesting that children can be trained to be moral. Free moral choice, in other words, requires that our choices be uncoerced. Yet it seems that moral education overlooks this fact, and (despite its good intentions) is just a coercive mechanism intended to get children to act according to the moral law. In practice, this would mean that Kant's theory of moral education, far from creating moral characters, would at best produce individuals who act in accord with duty. Even if their motivation for acting in accord with the moral law were as seemingly innocent as a devotion to the moral catechism they were taught in school, the fact of the matter would remain that their action is still not a free, uncoerced choice to act for the sake of duty itself. Failing this, we cannot claim that we have educated children to have morally worthy characters, but only that we have educated children who can act in accord with the moral law.

It is important to keep in mind in considering this objection that this apparent contradiction between Kant's moral philosophy and his philosophy of education arises only when we consider the fourth and final stage of education, that of moralization. We might think this strange at first, since, after all, the most obvious forms of coercion in Kant's theory take place in the earlier stages, especially in the stage of discipline. It is, after all, in this stage that punishment—even physical punishment if necessary—is suggested as way to control the child's behavior. But we must remember two things about the coercion that goes on in these earlier stages. First, we must remember that in these stages of education, we are still dealing

with young children who have not yet developed their reason to a point where we might expect them to make a correct moral decision on their own. It is a simple fact of the matter that when it comes to young children, we will have to use some sort of obvious coercion in order to keep them from harming themselves or to keep them from encroaching upon the freedom of others.

Second, it is important to keep in mind that these earlier stages of education are, in a sense, simply setting the stage for formal moral education, or the stage of moralization. This is not to say that they are unimportant stages in the moral education of the child. Indeed, they are crucial to developing a kind of character that is able to recognize the moral law and act in a way that respects the moral law. But these stages of education are concerned only with making sure that the child is receptive to the more formal moral lesson in the final stage of education. In the stage of discipline especially, the concern is not that children be able to make free choices, but rather that they begin to learn how to deny various inclinations, so that when they are ultimately faced with a moral decision they can make on their own, they will have an easier time making that decision. Imagine, for example, an adolescent who has been raised in isolation and has never been denied any whim or inclination in his life. It may, of course, be possible for this child, when presented with moral law, to internalize this law and make morally worthy choices as an adult, but it seems highly unlikely. The coercion that takes place in the early stages of Kantian education is thus both a necessary “placeholder” for the moral law in children whose reason has not fully developed and also a crucial tool that clears the way for moral knowledge and motivation.<sup>94</sup>

94. Still, it might be objected, it is still strictly speaking possible for even our spoiled adolescent to make moral choices. This is probably true, but—given what we know about Kant’s theory of the highest good—it still gives us an incomplete picture of moral choice and moral progress. I address this issue in the next section.

In order to investigate the criticism raised above, then, we need to pay close attention to the last stage of education, the stage of moralization. How much indoctrination is really going on in this stage? To what extent are choices being made *for* students? We might begin by looking at the first part of the moralization, the stage of moral catechism. The worry one might have at this stage is that students will simply obtain an unthinking allegiance to the moral law, perhaps out of a kind of respect for the figures of authority who introduced the moral law to them, or perhaps just out of habit. This would be problematic, of course, because for Kant it is very important that we rationally consider what the moral law requires of us before we act. This is not to say that Kant is opposed to developing a sympathetic disposition, for example, once we have decided what the moral law requires of us. But it is clearly not acceptable for children to act according to the moral law simply because they have been told to do so, or because they have developed a habit to do so.

Fortunately, there is little in Kant's theory of education that suggests such a picture. First, Kant is not suggesting that moral catechism be used to indoctrinate students. Kant's motivation for suggesting moral catechism is just the realization that students need to have a good understanding of the basic principles of morality when they embark on applying the moral law. And it is also important to remember that Kant does not suggest that teachers introduce moral facts dogmatically, before the pupil has had any instruction in thinking and judging for himself. The example he gives of moral catechism in the *Metaphysics of Morals* is far from a list of commandments that students must memorize and recite. Rather, the teacher in Kant's example appeals to the students' reason in an effort to let them realize these rules by themselves. The content of the moral catechism, Kant says, "can be developed from ordinary human reason."<sup>95</sup>

95. *Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:479.

Second, even students who participate in this moral catechism will eventually have to actively and rationally consider what the moral law requires of them. An instructor might introduce the moral law to pupils in order for them to be able to have a meaningful dialogue about it, but when it comes time to make real moral decisions, the student will have to rationally consider how his proposed maxim squares with the moral law. And nothing about the moral education that Kant suggests *ensures* that a student will make a moral choice. Indeed, the whole of his educational theory centers around the ultimate responsibility of students to make their own, free choices.

Thus, for Kant, moral education has to do with creating the best possible *conditions* for making moral choices and thus developing moral characters.<sup>96</sup> There is no doubt, I think, that a student who has been through this kind of moral education will be more likely to make moral worthy decisions than one who has not. But the decision to use the skills of reason developed in education still remains entirely up to the individual agent.

But this observation—that education makes moral choice more likely—might lead us to another concern about the role of Kant's philosophy of education within his broader practical philosophy. The concern is the following: even if Kant's special brand of moral education cannot guarantee that a child will make moral decisions later in his life, does it, in some sense, let those individuals who have not had such an education “off the hook,” so to speak, if they fail to make moral decisions? That is, is Kant saying that a moral education like the one he suggests is a necessary condition for making moral decisions?

The answer to this concern, I think, is that Kant *does* think that some kind of moral education is necessary, but that this type of moral education must be understood more broadly than the kind of education that Kant outlines, for example, in

96. See on this point Munzel, *Kant's Conception of Moral Character*, 274.

the lectures on pedagogy. The normal experiences that a person has in his or her formative years will (except in the most bizarre cases) serve as a sufficient education that enables us to act from duty. As we have seen throughout this chapter, Kant thinks that before a person can be held responsible, he must understand certain “subjective conditions of freedom,” that is, “the ability to act, and further, that we know what pertains thereto, that we are aware of the motivating ground and the object of the action.”<sup>97</sup> But these pieces of information can be easily learned through normal experience. It is crucial that a child be raised in some kind of society, of course. Kant does say that it would be “completely impossible” for an individual human agent to develop moral knowledge in complete isolation.<sup>98</sup> But, assuming that a child has at least one parent, and is perhaps able to play with other children, the “subjective conditions of freedom” should be able to develop.

This, however, means that a having a moral education *like the one Kant suggests* is not a necessary condition for recognizing the law that reason gives to us or for making a moral choice. We might have sympathy for a person who was raised without the benefit of such an education, but, assuming her rational capacities have developed normally, this fact will not serve as an excuse for wrongdoing. We seem, then, to have arrived at a kind of impasse. On the one hand, Kant has outlined a detailed account of moral education—one that he seems to think is central to moral life. On the other hand, however, his moral theory seems to suggest that this kind of specialized education might be helpful, but is not strictly speaking necessary, for making moral choices. The fact that Kant’s suggested method of education can help us make moral choices seems to reduce to an interesting empirical fact about childhood development. How can we resolve this tension?

97. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:291.

98. *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Ak 9:445.



*Moral Education and the Highest Good*

I suggest that Kant's philosophy of education can maintain the central role that he suggests for it when we think not of the individual moral decisions that agents make, but rather of the end, or goal, of ethics. Specifically, Kant's recommendations for moral education begin to take on a crucial—and perhaps even necessary—role when we remember that we have an obligation to work toward the highest good. It is not enough, if we have this duty, to hope that individual agents will make moral decisions. Rather, we must pursue activities that make this end more likely. And a moral education like the one Kant describes is precisely such an activity.

Of course, for this strategy to work, we must adopt the “secular” and communal understanding of the highest good (the interpretation evinced, for example, in Kant's presentation of the ethical community in the *Religion*). If one's understanding of the highest good in Kant's philosophy agreed, for example, with Kant's views in the Postulates of Pure Practical Reason in the second *Critique*, we could not make this argument so easily. Recall that Kant's view there is that the highest good is something that is achieved on an individual basis, and in an afterlife. If this were the case, it would be hard to see how education as Kant describes it could play a central role in his practical philosophy. For one thing, it would hardly matter how adept agents are at making moral choices if, in the end, they had forever to make morally worthy choices. Of course, Kant would not deny that it would be better for those on the receiving end of our (outwardly directed) actions in this life if our choices were moral choices, but even for those people, Kant's claim in the second *Critique* is that the maximum amount of happiness consistent with the maximum amount of virtue is something that awaits them individually in the afterlife. Thus, even though the moral choices we make in this life will affect

others, they cannot, in the end, add to or detract from the possibility of their achieving the highest good. This, according to the earlier account of the highest good, is something that God secures. On this account of Kant's practical philosophy, then, it seems, strictly speaking, that education cannot play any kind of essential role.

On the other hand, if we think of the highest good as something that we should strive for over the course of human history, and as something that is enjoyed by a society of people as the result of their combined moral worthiness, education takes on a much more important role. Empirical facts about how soon agents will be able to make moral choices, or with what kind of proficiency they will be able to reason about moral choices, become immediately relevant. These facts matter because it is precisely the combination of these choices that constitutes the highest good, experienced communally, as the end of history. In other words, when we conceive of the highest good as the end of history, we necessarily become concerned with empirical facts concerning the possibility of achieving this end, including what barriers exist that might hinder this achievement and what kinds of practices might help make the achievement of the highest good a more imminent possibility.<sup>99</sup> Chief among these "catalyzing" practices, of course, is the institution of education, as Kant understands it.

Indeed, putting the pieces of this chapter together, we can, I think, say that for Kant there is a kind of duty to educate children morally. As we have already seen, Kant explicitly claims that we have a duty to pursue the highest good. In chapter 1, I argued that we can make sense of this claim by, among other

99. Indeed, Kant says that two obstacles get in the way of developing the ideal form of education. The first is that "parents care for the home" and the second is that "princes [care] for the state," so that the education that either recommends does not have the ultimate end that is "best for the world" in mind. Rather, Kant says "the design for a plan of education must be made in a cosmopolitan manner" (*Lectures on Pedagogy*, Ak 9:448).

things, realizing that Kant's exhortation is a claim that we have a duty to pursue the empirical and material means necessary to bring about the highest good. Second, we can glean important information from the earlier comparisons with Locke and Rousseau. Like Locke, Kant thinks that children are neither morally good nor morally evil. We cannot, as it were, leave children alone and simply expect them to develop into moral agents. In Kant's own terminology, developing into a moral agent requires learning about the "subjective conditions of freedom" and, importantly, practicing one's virtue in order to develop a moral character. But, like Rousseau, Kant also worries about the negative effects that unchecked social interactions might have on our moral development. As we have seen above, these observations lead Kant to make a set of specific recommendations regarding education. Though we might hope that children will grow up to be moral agents "on their own," it is much more realistic and useful to pursue a kind of education that shapes certain habits, teaches students to appreciate their freedom, makes students aware of the needs and ends of others, and allows students to practice repeated moral judgment. If, in short, our duty to pursue the highest good amounts to a duty to pursue the most appropriate means necessary to that end for the conditions in which we find ourselves, and if Kant's empirical observations about the natural state of the child and the usefulness of certain types of education are correct, then we do have a duty to educate children morally. To be sure, we have this duty not because it is the only way in which a person will grow up to be a moral agent. We have this duty because of a larger duty to pursue the most efficient empirical means that aid us in our working toward the highest good.

Now, we might be a little skeptical of this claim at first, since Kant is so insistent that we have no obligation to do something that we *cannot* do, and certainly, the moral character of an agent is something that is up to no one else but that agent her-

self.<sup>100</sup> It's important, for this reason, to be clear that the duty suggested by Kant's account of education is not a duty to perfect the characters of others; rather, it is simply a duty to provide the conditions most likely to aid in this development. Indeed, it is probably most accurate to think of this duty as a duty to humanity as a whole, rather than as a duty to a particular agent or group of agents. In the pedagogy lectures themselves, Kant reinforces this interpretation when he claims that the "vocation" of morality is not something that individual agents can reach, but rather a goal that "the human species" must achieve.<sup>101</sup> Indeed Kant himself claims at one point that education is the single most important aid in achieving this end. He asks "How, then, are we to seek this perfection, and from whence is it to be hoped for?" His answer should at this point come as no surprise: "From nowhere else but education."<sup>102</sup>

100. For an excellent discussion of the possibility of a duty regarding the virtue of others see Denis, *Moral Self-Regard: Duties to Oneself in Kant's Moral Theory*, 144–150.

101. *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Ak 9:445.

102. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:471.

# FRIENDSHIP AND MORAL IMPROVEMENT



ONE COMMON and troubling criticism of Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy centers around the claim that his system has no room for the intimate attachments, such as friendship, that seem, intuitively, to be part of any description of a complete life. There are at least two versions of this criticism. The first has to do with what seems like a strong requirement of impartiality on Kant's part. Bernard Williams points to this feature of Kantian theory when he claims that "the moral point of view is specially characterized by its impartiality and indifference to any particular relations to particular persons."<sup>1</sup> Sally Sedgwick, in her analysis of feminist critiques of Kant's ethics, restates one such criticism as the concern that the "Kantian picture of agency seems to presuppose a context of *distrust*" (my emphasis), since friends and other close attachments necessarily interfere with my ability to be impartial.<sup>2</sup> The argument in both cases appears to be that Kantian agents are obliged to treat each person in their lives equally, since what gives a person moral standing is the capacity for practical reason that all agents share. Thus, friendships, which by definition consist of special relationships with others, cannot fit into the Kantian scheme.

1. Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 2.

2. Sally Sedgwick, "Can Kant's Ethics Survive the Feminist Critique?" in *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Robin May Schott, 77–100 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

This alleged blindness to particular relations is the source of a second criticism of Kant's theory. According to this criticism—put forward by Williams and Michael Stocker, for example—a Kantian cannot tell the right story about our motivation for action involving friends. Because of the earlier claims about impartiality, the reasons we have for helping friends (for example) must be the same as the reasons we have to help anybody else. Specifically, we must be motivated by the moral law; we must always act from duty. But, as these critics point out, this is not an apt description of motivation within a friendship. If I help a friend, I act for the sake of my friend, or because I am concerned for her welfare, not because I act from duty. To illustrate this point, Stocker tells the story of the Kantian who visits a friend in the hospital and, in response to his friend's gratitude, explains that he is "only doing his duty."<sup>3</sup>

Some commentators have come to Kant's defense, arguing that with respect to the first worry, Kant's system of imperfect duties carves out some room for an account of friendship and particular attachments. According to Kant, we have an imperfect duty to promote the happiness of others. This, of course, means that the happiness of others is an end that we have an obligation to pursue, but the way we go about fulfilling this duty is up to us. And having a friend whose well-being we care about and promote is just one way that we can further the happiness of others. With respect to the second worry—concerning motivation between friends—Kant's defenders have pointed out that an account of primary and secondary motivation can easily address this worry.<sup>4</sup> So, for example, friends need not be *immediately* motivated by respect for the moral law when they help each other. They can be motivated by a fondness for each other, as long as their motivation is limited by (and part of a system

3. Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories."

4. See Marcia Baron, "On the Alleged Repugnance of Acting from Duty," *Journal of Philosophy* 81, no. 4 (1984): 197–220.

with) a secondary motivation that stems from a respect for the moral law.

All of these observations and defenses of Kant are important and, it seems to me, correct. But it is interesting to observe that, according to the sketch of friendship provided in them, a Kantian agent has no specific obligation to seek out relationships like friendship. A person could, in other words, be a perfectly moral person and never participate in a relationship like friendship. Friendship is not a central part of a complete, moral life; rather it is simply one among many permissible means of fulfilling our imperfect duty to promote the happiness of others. This chapter challenges this notion and argues that one type of friendship—one that Kant calls “moral friendship” or the “friendship of disposition”—is not just allowable in Kant’s system of imperfect duties, but, indeed, essential to developing a moral character. Indeed, because friendship plays such an essential role, Kantian agents actually have a kind of duty to participate (or at least try to participate) in moral friendships. This duty to pursue character-improving friendships, of course, stems in large part from our duty to pursue the highest good. As we will see below, moral friendship provides the Kantian agent with a unique and essential method for moral self-improvement. And since striving for such virtue is part of our duty in pursuing the highest good, friendship (especially moral friendship) becomes an important part of our working toward this goal.

The first section of this chapter presents a brief sketch of Kant’s conception of friendship. Though Kant identifies at least three specific types of friendship in his writings, he also has a few things to say about the concept in general, and the first section notes some of these interesting features of Kant’s ideas about friendship, especially his claim that in friendship we must always maintain an appropriate balance of “love” and “respect.” The remaining sections discuss the individual types

of friendship that Kant identifies. Kant's clearest delineation of these types of friendship exists in the Collins lecture, where Kant introduces each individually. The first two types of friendship, which Kant calls "friendship of need" and "friendship of taste," I argue, both essentially serve as forums wherein Kantian agents can practice their imperfect duties to others and themselves. I discuss these two types of friendship together under this heading.

The major thesis of this chapter, however, has to do with the third type of friendship that Kant discusses, one that he calls "moral friendship," or sometimes the "friendship of disposition." The third section of this chapter argues that this type of friendship plays a unique role in the life of a Kantian agent. Unlike its counterparts (the friendships of need and taste), it is concerned less with specific moral actions of beneficence and self-improvement, but instead with the project of shaping a moral character (itself, of course, a duty). In the course of the discussion of moral friendship, we will pay special attention to the role that moral friendship plays in promoting moral self-examination in individual agents. As a relationship in which agents are able to trust one another completely, moral friendship is unique in its ability to promote such self-evaluation without risking the dangers of judgment and comparison that exist elsewhere in human society.

In addition, it will be important to discuss the very possibility of friendship in a world where, as Kant asserts, we are so often driven by inclination instead of duty, and thus marked by moral imperfection. Indeed, in almost every passage in which Kant discusses friendship, he adds a kind of wary caveat that tells us that friendship is either simply impossible in this world, or at best very unlikely. So, as a part of the analysis of each type of friendship, the discussion pays careful attention to what Kant says about the possibility of that type of friendship. In the end, I contend, if any of the types of friendship that



Kant describes are in fact impossible, it is the first two kinds of friendship (friendship of need and friendship of taste). This is because each of these types of friendship involves repeated and reciprocal practicing of an imperfect duty. In addition, these relationships are always at risk of being destroyed by jealousy or indignation. If we accept Kant's claims in the *Religion* about our tendency to constantly seek superiority over others, it seems these relationships will be difficult, of not impossible, for us to maintain.

On the other hand, the third type of friendship, moral friendship, is not a friendship that asks us to be perfectly moral as such. Instead, it requires of us a kind of second-order moral action, namely, to examine our motives and actions with the help of another and thus develop our moral character. This, I will argue, does not require moral perfection. Indeed, as we shall see, participants in a moral friendship are in fact marked by their moral *imperfections*. But they are also marked by a shared desire to overcome these imperfections through their friendship.

### *Kant's Idea of Friendship—Love and Respect*

In what is perhaps the most often cited passage in Kant's writings on the subject of friendship, Kant writes:

*Friendship* (considered in its perfection) is the union of two persons through equal mutual love and respect.—It is easy to see that this is an ideal of participating and sharing sympathetically in the other's well-being through the morally good will that unites them, and even though it does not produce the complete happiness of life, the adoption of this ideal in their disposition toward each other makes them deserving of happiness; hence human beings have a duty of friendship.<sup>5</sup>

5. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:469.

At first glance, most of this passage might not come as much of a surprise to the reader. The idea of friendship's being a "union of two persons" certainly seems familiar enough, for example. But a closer examination of this passage reveals several ideas about friendship that certainly deserve discussion. The first idea to consider is the claim in the first sentence of Kant's definition, above, that friendship is "the union of two persons through *equal mutual love and respect*." In order to fully understand Kant's idea of friendship, it is crucial to understand what he has in mind when he talks about these two attitudes of love and respect.<sup>6</sup>

The first of these attitudes, that of love, is probably the more intuitive of the pair. Kant explains later in the same section of the "Doctrine of Virtue" that "love can be regarded as attraction," or a principle that "bids friends to draw closer."<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, in the discussion of Friendship in the Vigilantius lecture, Kant explains that the first feature of any friendship is a "well-wishing love to others."<sup>8</sup> This claim that friendship consists of "well-wishing" seems a weaker claim than the claim in the "Doctrine of Virtue" about loving our friends. After all, insofar as it is generally our duty to make other people's ends consistent with our own, it seems that we already have a general duty of well-wishing. Kant even seems to admit as much later in the same passage when he goes on to explain that "well-wishing to others is the universal duty of love, which we owe to every man."<sup>9</sup> The difference, however, between the feelings that we have toward our friends and those that we have (or ought to have) toward mankind in general boils down, it seems,

6. For a lengthier treatment of love and respect, including a discussion of the duties of love and respect, see Marcia Baron, "Love and Respect in the Doctrine of Virtue," in *Kant's Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretative Essays*, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 391–407.

7. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:470.

8. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:675.

9. *Ibid.*

to the fact that, when it comes to our friends, we *enjoy* this feeling of well-wishing. Thus, Kant concludes, "The expression: *I am his friend; he is my friend* therefore means nothing else but, I cherish the inclination of well-wishing toward him."<sup>10</sup>

The second attitude of friendship, that of respect, is perhaps less intuitive to our thinking about friendship than the attitude of love. Furthermore, Kant uses the term here in a way that is slightly different from (though, I think, ultimately related to) the ways he uses it elsewhere. Often, when we think of the idea of respect in Kant's ethics, we might think of the idea of having "respect for other persons," that is, respecting their autonomy or personhood, and treating them as equals. And, of course, Kant also has a great deal to say about "respect for the moral law." In this case, respect serves as a feeling that essentially motivates us to act from duty. When Kant talks about respect in terms of its being one of the twin attitudes of friendship, however, he has neither of these meanings in mind. When Kant uses the term *respect* here, he has in mind a principle that is essentially opposed to the feeling of love. Thus, he explains, "love can be regarded as attraction and respect as repulsion, and if the principle of love bids friends to draw closer, the principle of respect requires them to stay at a proper distance from each other."<sup>11</sup> This idea of keeping a proper distance, then, is what Kant has in mind when he says that the ideal friendship finds the best balance between love and respect. The ideal friendship is thus one where friends are close, but not too close.

We might think this requirement a rather strange one. Indeed, we might think that if there exists any kind of relationship in which we need not practice the same kind of reserve that we practice elsewhere, it would be friendship. With col-

10. Ibid., Ak 27:676.

11. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:470.

leagues and acquaintances, even with partners and spouses, we often have to refrain from saying certain things, or crossing various boundaries, in order to avoid revealing too much of ourselves. But one might think that friendship (at least in its ideal) would be an exception to this rule.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, there is a sense in which Kant agrees with this assessment. And later in this chapter, when we look more closely at Kant's idea of moral friendship, it will become clear that Kant thinks that this type of friendship is unique and important for precisely this reason—it is a relationship wherein participants can be completely open and honest. However, as we will see, even within the honesty of moral friendship, Kant suggests that we couch our revelations in palatable terms. So how can we make sense of Kant's claim that friendship requires, in some cases, a certain degree of tact and reserve and, in other cases, a kind of distancing or "repulsion"?

The answer to this question lies in Kant's concern that friends always remain equals. This concern with equality and reciprocity in friendship appears regularly throughout Kant's writings on friendship. For example, in the *Vigilantius* lecture, he asserts that the second feature of friendship (after mutual well-wishing) is "that those who love are equals."<sup>13</sup> Kant insists that friendship cannot exist where there is a relationship between benefactor and recipient, where one party is indebted

12. Kant emphasizes the distinction between marriage and friendship in several of the lectures on ethics. In the *Vigilantius* lecture, Kant notes that the equality that marks the ideal friendship is not found in the ideal of marriage. There he argues that since a wife looks to her husband for protection, her respect for his personhood is necessarily greater than his for hers. In the *Herder* lecture, Kant's account is a little more evenhanded. There, he argues that the very goal of marriage is distinct from the goal of friendship. Unlike friendship, which is defined by the unity of the two friends for the sake of moral improvement, marriage is defined as a "union . . . for a single purpose, the perfection of the marriage" (Ak 27:50). In marriage, unlike in friendship, each party has his or her own distinct role toward achieving this end.

13. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:676.

to the other. In the same *Vigilantius* passage, Kant goes on to explain that “well-wishing, love and friendship differ from *favour*, in this respect. The ability, that is, to promote the other’s well-being, and do him good, *must be the same in both*, whether it be a question of their powers, or of wealth or influence.”<sup>14</sup>

But why should this sense of equality and reciprocity be so important? Why does Kant think that inequality in friendship is so detrimental to the relationship? The answer, as we have seen in previous chapters, lies in the vices that Kant thinks we graft onto our predisposition to humanity in the *Religion*. Kant describes the source of these vices as “a self-love which is physical and yet *involves comparison*.”<sup>15</sup> Kant’s description here brings to mind Rousseau’s concept of *amour propre*, especially because Kant, like Rousseau, thinks that there are two stages to this disposition. Initially, we simply seek a kind of equal status with our cohorts. Thus, Kant explains that “out of this self-love originates the inclination to *gain worth in the opinion of others*, originally, of course, merely equal worth.”<sup>16</sup> At first, at least, we simply desire to make sure that we are just as happy as our neighbor, and that nobody is gaining superiority over us. Soon enough, however, our “constant anxiety that others might be striving for ascendancy” turns into a desire to strive for such ascendancy ourselves. This desire mirrors Rousseau’s idea of perverted *amour propre*.<sup>17</sup> It is the desire to “acquire superiority” over others.<sup>18</sup> Now, of course, this predisposition does not “issue from nature,” as Kant puts it, but rather is an inclination that develops as a result of our living in society with others

14. *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

15. Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Ak 6:27.

16. *Ibid.*

17. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 87. See also John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 198–199.

18. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 87.

who, like us, seek equal standing, and eventually superiority. This means that, unlike a biological function, for example, this predisposition and the inclinations that arise from it are things that we have control over. We can choose to follow the inclination or not follow it. On the other hand, Kant seems to think that these inclinations are deeply rooted in our nature as social creatures, and are thus particularly pervasive and difficult to overcome. He calls the vices that stem from such inclinations “diabolical vices” and explains that they include, among other things, “envy, ingratitude, [and] joy in others’ misfortunes.”<sup>19</sup>

It thus becomes clear why Kant insists that any friendship must find a balance between love and respect. Because our tendency to compare ourselves with others arises and becomes particularly problematic when we live in society with others, friendship poses a special risk while at the same time providing a special opportunity. On the one hand, friendship allows us (as we will see in more detail below) to participate in a relationship of mutual aid and enjoyment. On the other hand, however, the fact that—through friendship—we become close with another person means that we are especially vulnerable to vices of comparison and competition. Without an attitude of reserve and respect, and the resultant attitudes of equality and reciprocity, friendship would too easily succumb to this predisposition. This is a point to keep in mind throughout this discussion, since, for Kant, our predisposition to humanity is one of the things that makes friendship very rare in this world, if not utterly impossible.

Finally, what can we make of Kant’s claim in the “Doctrine of Virtue” passage (above) that friendship is a duty? And what about his claim that friendship has more to do with making us deserving of happiness than it does with actually making us happy? The answer to both of these questions has to do with

19. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Ak 6:27.

the main thesis of this chapter, namely that, for Kant, friendship (in particular moral friendship) is a relationship that improves our moral character. Thus, we can also begin to see how it is that friendship can be considered to be a duty. Our duty to work toward the highest good (in this case, to perfect our own virtue) means that we also have a duty to pursue or take part in activities that improve our moral character. Friendship is one of these activities. Of course, we can't be commanded to be friends with any particular person. Kant is clear that such feelings cannot be commanded. But we can have a duty to pursue such a relationship with *some* person.

The remainder of this chapter examines the specific types of friendship that Kant outlines. I give special attention to the third of these types, moral friendship, and I argue that it is this relationship that Kant thinks of as particularly beneficial to moral improvement. How moral friendship plays this role will be discussed in its own section.

### *Friendship as Imperfect Duty*

#### *Friendship of Need*

The first specific type of friendship that Kant discusses is the friendship of need. As its name suggests, this type of relationship is essentially a kind of reciprocal relationship in which each party sees to the needs of the other. According to Kant, it is the "first [type] of friendship among men," and, as such, "occurs, for the most part, under the most primitive conditions."<sup>20</sup> Kant cites the example of "savages" who go hunting together, each "stand[ing] up for" and "accomodat[ing] the needs of his fellows." This description suggests that, initially at least, there is an element of self-interest in forming such relationships. Such primitive individuals have a decided interest in

20. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:425.

coming together and forming a special relationship with each other, perhaps as a kind of insurance policy against hardship.

But it is also clear that while the friendship of need is most easily and succinctly characterized by examining its origins, Kant thinks it takes on a different shape once it is transposed into the modern world. For one thing, he notes, “the more civilized men become, the more universal their outlook and the smaller the incidence of special friendships.”<sup>21</sup> Unsurprisingly, Kant thinks that this type of friendship becomes less and less likely as human needs develop from basic needs into “luxuries.” Indeed, he remarks, “in the state of luxury such friendship does not occur.”<sup>22</sup> The reason for this, Kant explains, is that as we acquire more needs beyond those of mere survival and subsistence, we have less time to concern ourselves with others’ needs.<sup>23</sup> This remark, too, would suggest some element of self-interestedness in forming friendships of need. As our needs develop into luxuries, we find that our resources are more efficiently used in securing our own needs. In a “primitive” state, where risk of starvation, illness, and the like are real threats, it makes sense to devote time and energy to relationships that, in effect, keep us alive. As these needs develop into luxuries, the cost of maintaining such friendships apparently begins to outweigh the benefits of simply securing one’s own luxuries.

It seems, then, that in the modern world, friendship of need loses some of its status as a survival skill, and becomes something resembling a moral ideal. And in this ideal form, the friendship of need serves as a kind of opportunity to practice our imperfect duty of beneficence. Recall that in the *Groundwork*, Kant describes imperfect duties as those duties whose performance is not specifically dictated by circumstance. Instead, the performance of these duties, though required, can

21. *Ibid.*, Ak 27:428.

22. *Ibid.*, Ak 27:425.

23. *Ibid.*



be fulfilled in a number of different ways. In his sketch of such duties, Kant divides the class further into imperfect duties to ourselves and imperfect duties to others. I contend, then, that the friendship of need, in its ideal form, is a kind of practicing of the latter kind of imperfect duty. Thus, in order to practice our imperfect duties, we might give to charity, or volunteer at a local hospital. In addition, we might form a relationship with another person in which each sees to the needs of the other.<sup>24</sup>

Kant insists in the Collins lecture that there is still an element of the friendship of need in every friendship.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Kant claims, it is best if we simply trust in our friends' beneficence, and never really put them to the test. This is because when one friend becomes a "benefactor" to another, a detrimental imbalance can arise that can destroy a friendship. As noted earlier, Kant insists in several passages that a friendship cannot survive the inequality that results when one party becomes benefactor to the other. In the Collins lecture, for example, friendship is described as a "delicate" relationship that cannot survive feelings of indebtedness or jealousy.<sup>26</sup>

This assessment of the friendship of need leaves us with

24. We might wonder at this point (and throughout the discussion) how Kant would classify a friendship in which the parties to the friendship simply "enjoy each other's company" without, necessarily, doing favors for each other. The answer to this question, I think, depends largely on how we describe the specifics of the friendship. If, for example, two people simply enjoy each other's company for no other reason than that it makes them happy to be with one another, then it seems we might classify this type of relationship as a friendship of need. In other words, in this type of relationship, simply being with one another contributes to each party's sense of happiness and well-being. But usually, it seems, there is more to this kind of friendship than just this sort of well-being. Or, more specifically, there is usually a deeper story about why such friendships provide a sense of well-being. In particular, it is often the case that in such relationships we often feel at ease with the other person, or feel as though we can "be ourselves" around that person. These types of statements are indicators that such a relationship is something like what Kant calls a moral friendship, which is discussed below.

25. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:425.

26. *Ibid.*

the question to which Kant so often returns—is this type of friendship even possible, or is it just an ideal? In general, when Kant discusses the friendship of need, his assertion is that it is impossible in this world, but is an important idea nonetheless. Thus, he explains, “in experience, it [friendship] is very defective, but in morals it is a very necessary Idea.”<sup>27</sup> He continues to explain that “the maximum of mutual love is friendship, and this is an Idea, since it serves as a measure by which to determine reciprocal love.”<sup>28</sup> If we have in our minds a picture of what a perfect friendship would look like, we can, as Kant says, “measure friendship, and see how far it is still deficient.”<sup>29</sup>

So what, precisely, stands in the way of our being able to participate in this type of friendship? For one thing, as we have already seen, Kant thinks that we have a certain predisposition to acquire superiority over others. And, as I hinted above, a friendship of need, with its emphasis on helping another person who is, in some sense or another, worse off, stands in particular danger of being destroyed by such inclinations. A friendship of need requires us to practice our imperfect duty of beneficence toward another person repeatedly and consistently. In addition, it requires us to practice this duty without a sense of pride, resentment, or vanity. Given what Kant has to say about our sensible nature and moral imperfection, these might seem impossible waters to navigate.

### *Friendship of Taste*

The worries raised above about the possibility of a friendship of need, as well as the risks associated with this kind of relationship, apply equally well to the second type of friendship that Kant discusses, so-called friendship of taste. Kant does not discuss this type of relationship as often as he discusses the friendship of need, but he does refer to it specifically in the Col-

27. Ibid., Ak 27:423.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., 27:424.

lins lecture, and suggests an interpretation of it in several passages in the *Vigilantius* lecture. There, Kant explains that it is friendship of taste that we often have in mind initially when we think of the concept of friendship.<sup>30</sup> In the *Collins* lecture, the relationship is initially described in terms of “taking pleasure in the company and mutual association of the two parties.”<sup>31</sup> In this passage, at least, the picture that is drawn to mind is one of two individuals who share many of the same tastes and pursuits, and perhaps mutual friends as well. Because of these shared interests and experiences, they simply enjoy each others’ company. We may, at first, think that Kant suggests such an interpretation when he compares friends to compatriots in a strange country who share principles among a group of people whose principles are different from their own.<sup>32</sup>

But read in this way, these passages are misunderstood, since it is not the similarities between persons that exemplify a friendship of taste according to Kant, but rather their differences. This is because in this type of relationship, the friendship is based on what each party can *learn* from the other. Kant explains that it is for this reason that friendships of taste do not typically occur between “persons of similar station or calling,” since “what one [scholar] knows, the other will know, too.”<sup>33</sup> The purpose of a friendship of taste, then, is to broaden one’s horizons, so to speak. “For,” Kant explains, “men are bound together only by what one can contribute to the other’s needs; not by what the other already has.”<sup>34</sup>

For this reason, the friendship of taste fills an important role in Kant’s taxonomy of the types of friendship. Specifically, this type of relationship fits neatly into the discussion of friendship and imperfect duties. In the case of friendships of taste, however, it is not (in the first place) a duty of beneficence

30. *Ibid.*, Ak 27:680.

32. *Ibid.*, Ak 27:681.

34. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, Ak 27:426.

33. *Ibid.*, Ak 27:426.

that we are fulfilling, but rather the duty we have to perfect our talents. Instead of helping others with their needs of subsistence, this type of friendship serves as a forum wherein we can perfect our own intellectual talents. This explains in part why Kant thinks that a friendship of taste has to involve two people who do not share identical backgrounds. Quite simply, we can't learn anything from somebody whose "knowledge base" is identical to ours.<sup>35</sup>

Still, it is important to note that the friendship of taste is subject to the same dangers suggested above in the discussion of friendship of need. Participants in this type of relationship, it would seem, might become jealous of the other person because they think their counterpart is more talented, makes more money, or has more interesting experiences. The reverse might just as easily be the case. The "scholar" who has this type of relationship with a "merchant or soldier" might feel proud or superior when associating with his friend.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, precisely because participating in a friendship of taste requires us to associate with someone who does not share our background or experience, we may find it very easy to fall into the trap of comparison. As Kant puts it, "the envy of the other's merits is the basis for mistrust and reserve, and the greatest obstacle to friendship; among men, indeed it can lead to the worst vices."<sup>37</sup>

35. Of course, because friendship is by nature a reciprocal relationship, it will be the case that I will also help my friend develop *her* talents in this type of relationship. Why should we describe the friendship of taste as a relationship in which we fulfill these duties only to *ourselves*, then? The answer is that, while it is true that the friends in such a relationship benefit reciprocally, Kant thinks that we can have an obligation only to promote the happiness of *others* and pursue *our own* perfection. Thus, I do not mean to deny that, in both friendships of need and friendships of taste, both parties benefit reciprocally. However, when viewed through the lens of our imperfect duties to ourselves and others, each relationship can be described only in this kind of unilateral fashion.

36. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:426.

37. *Ibid.*, Ak 27:679.

*Moral Friendship and Self-Evaluation*

Like the two kinds of Kantian friendship discussed above, moral friendship is directed, ultimately, to the members' achievement of moral improvement and perfection. Unlike the friendships of need and taste, however, moral friendship does not involve the practice of individual, imperfect duties between the members of a friendship. Indeed, as we will see, it is a kind of friendship that exists between two parties who are less than perfectly moral, yet who strive to become moral. Kant's conception of moral friendship is best described as a relationship of complete trust, in which each of the members feels able to share his thoughts and judgments with the other. In his discussions of moral friendship in the "Doctrine of Virtue" and the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant insists that this type of sharing is essential to striving for and achieving moral perfection. Part of the discussion that follows will attempt to discover why Kant thinks this is so.

One of Kant's more detailed descriptions of this type of friendship appears in the Collins lecture. Here Kant explains that, unlike friendships of need and taste, moral friendship "involves dispositions of feeling, and not those of actual service."<sup>38</sup> In other words, unlike those other friendships, which involve performing a specific kind of moral action (either seeing to our friend's needs or perfecting our talents), moral friendship is more closely associated and concerned with the attitudes that friends take toward each other. Specifically, it is a relationship in which friends feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts and feelings with one another. In the Vigilantius lecture, Kant claims that "the intellectual unification" of friendship is the intimate communion of feelings and thoughts between the friendship's participants. The goal of such a relationship is to further "an intellectual need."<sup>39</sup> Kant's most

38. *Ibid.*, Ak 27:426.39. *Ibid.*, Ak 27:682.

succinct and explicit definition of moral friendship is perhaps found in the “Doctrine of Virtue,” where he defines moral friendship as “the complete confidence of two persons in revealing their secret judgments and feelings to each other, as far as such disclosures are consistent with mutual respect.”<sup>40</sup>

Thus, it is clear that for Kant, moral friendship is a relationship in which each participant is able to be completely candid with the other. The relationship is typified by a sense of trust and comfort between its participants. In several passages, Kant suggests that this desire to be completely open with another person is almost innate in us. In the *Vigilantius* lecture, Kant claims that “it already lies in human nature, to love something outside oneself, and especially another human being.”<sup>41</sup> And more to the point, in the “Doctrine of Virtue,” he argues that human beings are “meant for society” and that, as such, we want to “reveal” ourselves by sharing our feelings and judgments.<sup>42</sup> Of course, as we have already seen, there is a certain danger in opening up to another person in this way, since, in general, we have reason to fear others’ judgments. That is, if I trust the wrong person, the person in whom I confide might compare himself to me and think himself more virtuous than I. In Kant’s ideal friendship, however, this danger is (by definition) removed. It is precisely in the context of moral friendship that we can release ourselves from the fear of external judgment and comparison and share our thoughts with one another.

So far, then, we have noted two distinct features of moral friendship. First, we have seen that the ideal moral friendship essentially allows us to escape from the dangers of comparison and judgment that pervade other relationships. Second, it is a relationship whose purpose it is to promote each person’s moral virtue. What we have left to demonstrate, then, is just how

40. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:471.

41. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:682.

42. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:471.

these two facts fit together. How can a relationship of honesty and trust actually help us perfect our moral virtue?

Kant suggests an answer when he tells us that the “first command of all duties to oneself” is the command to “know” or “scrutinize” oneself.<sup>43</sup> This command to know ourselves, he explains, does not have to do with examining one’s abilities or talents, but rather with comparing our virtue to the law of morality. But Kant also thinks that “knowing oneself” is impossible in isolation. He explains that only in confiding can opinions be “subject to reflection. . . . This is the whole purpose of man, which allows him to enjoy his existence.”<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere, he claims that “we cannot rectify circumscribed ideas and thoughts in any other way than by sharing them, and should this not occur, we are never secured against errors.” Thus, he concludes, “one pure goal” leads us to friendship: “To perfect our acquirements by communicating, rectifying, and determining them through the judgments of others.”<sup>45</sup> And despite the difficulty in submitting ourselves to moral friendship, Kant insists that this type of friendship (or at least the striving toward it) is no less than a “duty set by reason.”<sup>46</sup>

At first glance, perhaps these claims seem uncontroversial enough. After all, sometimes it is only by talking a problem through, so to speak, that we understand what we are thinking, or what kinds of maxims are guiding our behavior. But we might also think that this is a particularly strange thing for Kant to say. After all, it seems like the picture that we get of Kantian moral reasoning elsewhere doesn’t really see this need for confiding with others. We know the moral law, for example, through a fact of reason, and we are able to decide, on our own, whether or not to act on various maxims. At the very least, it seems, we have to concede that for Kant, moral friendship is

43. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:441.

44. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:427.

45. *Ibid.*, Ak 27:683.

46. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:469.

not a *necessary* condition for making the right moral choices, or acting from the motive of duty. Certainly, a Kantian would not forgive a person an indiscretion because that person was unable to talk about his decision with a friend before he acted. Clearly, if moral friendship has the important role in Kant's moral philosophy that he seems to suggest it has, it is going to be a more nuanced role.

Nor is it the case that a Kantian agent will be able to use her friend's moral virtue as a kind of standard to live up to. Aside from the obvious problems with inequality and comparison that this would raise, such an interpretation runs counter to some basic Kantian tenets. Kant reminds us, for example, that when we examine our thoughts and take stock of our ability to reason about morality, it is essential that we compare ourselves only to the moral law, and not to other people.<sup>47</sup> Again, it is crucial that Kant makes this caveat. As important as others might be to the process of moral self-examination, they cannot play the role of moral standard. Nor can we allow the process of self-examination to be one in which we simply confirm that we are at least as moral as, or slightly more so than, our neighbor. Both of these approaches are contrary to the Kantian scheme, and must therefore be guarded against.

Indeed, knowledge of and respect for the moral law are both *presupposed* by the idea of moral friendship. In order for two people to be friends, they have to be moved by the same moral principles. This, I take it, is Kant's point in the passage that may have confused us above, in which friends are compared to compatriots in a strange country. Kant's point there is not that friends must have the same hobbies, pursuits, and interests. Rather, Kant's point is just that, in order for two people to be friends, they must share a commitment to the same group of moral principles. This claim seems uncontroversial. Imag-

47. See *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:609, and *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:435.



ine, for example, what it would be like, as a person moved by notions of equality and reciprocity, to be “friends” with someone who took a purely self-interested approach to life’s choices. It is easy to see that such a relationship could hardly get off the ground. And, indeed, if the friendship in question is one whose purpose is to help us achieve moral virtue, then it seems a disagreement about moral principles between the friendship’s participants would be even more fundamentally problematic.

Still, despite the fact that Kant thinks we ought to be able to access and act upon the moral law in isolation, there is nevertheless the sense in much of what Kant says that moral *self-examination* needs to be a process that occurs in some kind of social setting. The reason for this, as he argues in the *Lectures on Ethics* especially, is that a certain element of objectivity is required for moral self-examination, and try as we might, this kind of objectivity is difficult to achieve when we engage in self-examination without the aid of others. Kant explains that we are especially prone to self-deception when it comes to assessing our thoughts and actions. As he points out in the *Vigilantius* lecture, “man is only too readily inclined to persuade himself of something, and to conjure up more than the truth.”<sup>48</sup>

But what does this problem of self-deception, or inclination to “conjure up more than the truth,” amount to for Kant? First, it will probably come as no surprise that it often consists of a tendency to overrate ourselves morally, an attitude that Kant calls “arrogance” in the *Vigilantius* lecture. It is easy enough to imagine how this tendency is realized—we revise the stories we tell ourselves about various circumstances, lie to ourselves about our motivations, and rationalize about the import of our actions. But there is also a second kind of self-deception that occurs when we engage in moral self-examination. This is what Kant calls the tendency to “despondency,” or the feeling

48. *Lectures on Ethics*, 27:616.

that, despite my best efforts, I can never live up to the requirements of the moral law. In the “Doctrine of Virtue,” Kant lists two tendencies: the first, toward a “fanatical contempt for oneself,” corresponds roughly with the tendency toward despondence. The second is an “egotistical self-esteem which takes mere wishes . . . for proof of a good heart.” This corresponds, in turn, with the tendency toward arrogance.<sup>49</sup> These, then, are the two ways in which we deceive ourselves about our moral worthiness. In both of these cases, the element of objectivity gained by sharing our thoughts with others serves to ameliorate the problem of self-deception. I may, for example, feel that, despite my best efforts, I can never live up to the requirements of the moral law. A trusted friend may, in this case, be able to listen to my concerns and reassure me of all that I have done, or of the difficulty that all of us have in living up to this standard. Conversely, I may think that I have been particularly virtuous when, in fact, I have really acted out of a kind of enlightened self-interest. In this case a friend whom I trust may be able to point out to me that I am perhaps rating myself too highly. This latter piece of news may, of course, be difficult to give, and we should tread carefully when we share it. But in a friendship of trust, at least, we can be relatively assured of the fact that our friend is not taking part in excessive judgment or comparison when he gives us this advice.

The way to solve the problem of self-deception, then, is to ensure that there is always an element of objectivity in our observation of ourselves. So, for example, Kant explains in the Collins lecture that one advisable method of ensuring objectivity is by observing our own actions instead of just “eavesdropping on (ourselves).”<sup>50</sup> So, for example, we might attribute to ourselves a generous character, or feel that we fulfill our duties

49. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:441.

50. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:365.

of beneficence, but when we look at our actions, we might find few examples of this supposed beneficence. Of course, there is always the chance that even when we observe our actions, we might reinterpret our motives (or even the actions themselves) and fail to get the message that we should from observing our actions. Thus, in order to evaluate myself, I might ask myself what kinds of beneficent actions I have undertaken in the recent months. I might recall that on several occasions, I donated money to a charity and volunteered at various events. I might then congratulate myself for having performed such actions and feel safe in asserting that in fact, I have lived up to a fairly high standard of beneficence. Of course, it might also be the case that I gave the money to charity only for tax reasons, or to appear magnanimous. And perhaps I volunteered at the events only to meet influential people who were also in attendance. The lesson here is simply that, while observing one's actions is a useful tool in moral self-evaluation (if I found that I had done nothing that even appeared beneficent, I might get a hint that something was amiss), it cannot guard completely against self-deception.

It seems that sharing our ideas plays much the same role that examining one's actions does, with the added benefit of providing an extra guard against self-deception. If we were simply to examine our ideas without the aid of a trusted friend, we would, Kant asserts, run into a similar set of problems. In the *Vigilantius* lecture, Kant explains that "consciousness involves only subjective certainty, i.e., the subject is unaware of other possible circumstances that might cause his certainty to waver."<sup>51</sup> In other words, we view the world, as it were, through our own prejudices and mistaken reasoning. Because they are our own prejudices and mistakes, we cannot typically separate ourselves from them and evaluate them objectively. It takes an

51. *Ibid.*, Ak 27:616.

external observer to draw our attention to these missteps in reasoning. Indeed, close friends often have a kind of privileged epistemological position precisely because they have known us for a longer period of time. A trusted moral friend will be especially attuned to the kinds of mistakes and oversights I typically make in my own assessment of myself, whether these mistakes tend toward “despondence” or (perhaps more often) “arrogance.”

We might wonder, however, if Kant is being entirely consistent with statements that he makes elsewhere when he insists that we require an external observer to help us through these mistakes in moral reasoning. In section 40 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, for example, Kant seems to have a somewhat different account of our abilities when he discusses “common human understanding.” Here, when Kant talks about common sense, he doesn’t have in mind “vulgar” opinions that are widely shared, but rather “the faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (*a priori*) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole and thereby avoid the illusion which, from subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on the judgment.”<sup>52</sup> Kant’s emphasis here on “subjective private conditions” brings to mind his discussion from the lectures outlined above. But here, rather than insisting that there is no way to overcome these subjective conditions, he seems to be saying instead that such an ability is a fundamental part of human moral reasoning and is, in fact, a widely shared, basic ability. Thus, Kant explains that this kind of common sense is “the least that can be expected from anyone who lays claim to the name of a human being.”<sup>53</sup>

52. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Ak 5:293–294.

53. *Ibid.*, Ak 5:293.

How can we reconcile these claims with Kant's claims about self-examination above? The answer, it seems, is that in this section of the third *Critique*, Kant is making a claim about our ability to form and apply maxims, but not necessarily a claim about our ability to judge ourselves once we have already acted. In other words, Kant understands the common sense of the third *Critique* as the ability to imagine how one's own maxim would, if brought to light, affect those around him. In the *Lectures on Ethics* and the discussion of friendship more generally, the emphasis is not specifically on this ability, but rather our ability to retrospectively gauge our own moral virtue. So, for example, in the third *Critique*, Kant's emphasis is on a "way of thinking" about moral choices.<sup>54</sup> He explains that one practices this way of thinking by abstracting from the "charm and emotion" that "contingently attach to our own judging."<sup>55</sup> The result is the ability (1) to be "unprejudiced" and "think for oneself," (2) to be "broad-minded," that is, to "think in the position of everyone else," (3) to be "consistent," always thinking "in accord with oneself."<sup>56</sup> So, when Kant says that this ability is "the least that can be expected" from a moral agent, he means that without it moral reasoning—that is, applying the moral law to specific situations—could not occur at all. If the Kantian agent is responsible for deciding how his actions fit in with the ends of others, he necessarily requires the ability to think from an external perspective.

Things become more complicated, however, when it comes to analyzing our own moral virtue. To be sure, there are ways for an individual to go about abstracting from his own subjective conditions in order to do this—for example, examining one's own actions in order to discern one's virtue. But analyzing one's own virtue, and avoiding the pitfalls of arrogance and

54. Ibid., Ak 5:295.

55. Ibid., Ak 5:294.

56. Ibid.

despondence, requires more than just imagining how one's actions might affect others, or how one's actions might come into a conflict with the ends of others. These kinds of thought experiments, as it were, can be done from a subjective, yet enlightened, perspective. But when it comes to examining our own virtue for the purposes of moral improvement, we must remove ourselves from our subjective circumstances altogether. This kind of self-examination requires information that cannot be attained simply by imagining oneself in another's position. Instead, it requires an external and objective perspective, and this external perspective is aptly provided (and perhaps only provided) by a trusted friend.

Still, Kant's discussion in the third *Critique* suggests, perhaps, a kind of bridge between moral friendship and the other types of friendship, especially the friendship of taste. When we consider Kant's repeated insistence that we ought to think from the standpoint of others, friendship of taste takes on a moral significance that goes beyond simply providing an opportunity to perfect our talents. By associating with different types of people, we naturally cultivate our ability to think from other perspectives and to imagine how our actions might be consistent—or inconsistent—with their ends. This is especially true when it comes to friendships of taste since, as we saw above, Kant thinks of these friendships as existing between two agents with different backgrounds. But, for purposes of comparison, it is crucial to point out that there is still an important difference between these types of friendship and moral friendship when it comes to the kinds of needs that each is intended to fulfill. As a result, there will also be a clear difference in the kind of attitude that participants in the friendship have toward each other and toward the relationship itself. As Kant describes friendships of need and taste, much of the emphasis seems to be on what we can gain from our friends (and, conversely, what we can give to our friends). Whether the

friendship is centered around the needs that we can have fulfilled and help fulfill, or whether it is centered around the talents that we can cultivate or help cultivate, this “give and take” feature seems to be the potentially dangerous part of these types of friendships. In short, it is nearly impossible to keep the balance sheets even in these types of relationships. There is always the danger that one friend will have more resources, or seem to have more interesting experiences, than the other. This, I take it, is the concern that lies behind Kant’s repeated assertions about the difficulty—if not impossibility—of finding a true friendship.

Is the same thing true of moral friendships? On the face of things, we might think that the same risk presents itself here, too. But upon closer investigation, it becomes clear that Kant’s idea of a moral friendship is described better as a kind of joint venture in moral improvement than as a kind of “give and take” relationship. Both agents are morally imperfect, and they know they are morally imperfect. They approach the relationship, then, as agents who—like the compatriots in a strange country—are able to help each other through the challenges presented by morality. And, crucially, they are able to help each other because they both experience the same sense of lacking when it comes to living up to the moral law. This difference in the kinds of needs and attitudes that go into the various types of friendship may help us see a bit better why moral friendship might actually be easier to maintain than the other types of friendship. Recall that, for Kant, the fact that endangers most friendships is our desire to preserve equality and, ultimately, seek a kind of preemptory ascendancy over others. I have argued above that this tendency poses a particular risk to those friendships (of need and taste) marked by a kind of “give and take” relationship. Within a moral friendship, however, there is already an acknowledgment of the fact that both parties are less than perfect. This is, however, not to say that participants in a moral

friendship enter into a friendship for the specific purpose of building their moral character. If this were the case, we might rightly worry whether this description didn't itself misdescribe the important features of love and care that are central to such a close relationship. But, crucially, in a moral friendship, there is never the sense that the other party has something that I need. Instead, the participants in Kant's description of a moral friendship find themselves equally lacking, and the "service" they provide one another is that of a trusted and objective external observer to our attempts to be moral.

There is room and need, then, in Kant's account of moral reasoning—specifically in his account of moral self-evaluation—for a trusted, external perspective. But this, in itself, raises its own set of worries. Recall that for Kant, friendship (of all sorts) is defined by its appropriate balance of love and respect. But if I am to be completely open and honest with my friend, and she, in turn, is to point out errors in my moral evaluation, it seems this delicate balance may be easily disrupted. How, precisely, then, should we share our thoughts and draw attention to our friends' mistakes in moral reasoning?

With respect to the first question (how much we ought to share with our friends), Kant certainly does not think we are under any obligation to unburden ourselves completely. Nor, it seems, would it be particularly prudent to do so. In the Collins lecture, he raises the question of whether there is "still a need for reserve" within a moral friendship. Kant's answer is that, "even to our best friend, we must not discover ourselves as we naturally are and know ourselves to be, for that would be a nasty business."<sup>57</sup> It is easy to see why this would be the case—try as we might to listen to our friends without judgment, some thoughts will simply not withstand the danger of comparison and judgment when shared. Of course, this doesn't necessarily

57. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:427.



mean that friends must completely censor themselves, either. It is entirely possible to share one's weaknesses without, as it were, going into explicit detail.

When it comes to "correcting" our friends, Kant also has some suggestions. Among the "rules of prudence" mentioned earlier, for example, Kant seems at first to suggest that we should not point out the moral failings of another person. "It is almost impossible to do so," he says, "without assailing his self-respect."<sup>58</sup> However, in this context, I think, Kant is worried about something more than simply pointing out an error in a friend's reasoning. After all, it seems that pointing out such errors is actually a necessary part of being a member of a moral friendship. Rather, Kant's concern is with *how* we point out these errors. He warns against "uncover(ing) [a friend's] weaknesses, censur(ing) his errors, pretend(ing) to great insight about him, or in any way evinc(ing) superiority over him."<sup>59</sup> Kant's warnings suggest that there is a right way, and a wrong way, to point out a friend's errors. Indeed, in the "Doctrine of Virtue," Kant says it is a "duty of love" to point out my friend's faults to him. Presumably, this should be done tactfully, and without any air of superiority. But it must be done, nonetheless.<sup>60</sup>

Still, just as in his discussion of the other types of friendship—friendships of need and taste—Kant insists that moral friendship is, at best, a rarity.<sup>61</sup> But, as we have already seen here, the reasons for moral friendship's rarity seem to be different from the reasons for the rarity—or even impossibility—of the other two types of friendship. This is because in a moral friendship, the relationship is actually marked by the *imperfections* of each person (and, importantly, their shared desire to overcome these imperfections). So why would Kant still insist

58. Ibid., Ak 27:685.

59. Ibid.

60. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:470.

61. *Lectures on Ethics*, Ak 27:680.

that moral friendship is still very difficult to maintain? I suspect there are several reasons for Kant's continued pessimism. First, as we saw earlier, Kant is well aware of the fact that few, if any, friendships will be *pure* moral friendships. After all, any friend with whom we feel close enough to confide in will probably also be a friend who wants and is willing to help us when we are in need. To the extent, then, that moral friendships are quite naturally mixed with other types of friendship, there will exist the risk of comparison that troubles those kinds of relationship.

Second, it seems quite possible that moral friendship, though not susceptible to the types of comparison that bedevil the other types of friendship, will still be susceptible to another type of comparison, this time about how virtuous one is in comparison to one's friend. Some of the risk of this type of comparison will be tempered by the fact that both parties to the relationship know that they, too, are imperfect. But, of course, we know all too well that an acknowledgment of our own shortcomings is rarely a hindrance to judging others. What gives the participants in a moral friendship a chance, I suspect, is their shared commitment to moral improvement. So, while agents are rarely, if ever, moved to have a friend for the sole purpose of moral improvement, the relationship itself does presume a certain dedication to moral improvement and the moral law.

Indeed, it is precisely because the individuals in a moral friendship are imperfect and aware of their imperfections that Kant suggests in the *Vigilantius* lectures that friendship has less to do with *well-liking* than it does with *well-wishing*. This claim might strike us as odd, since if there is any emotion that we tend to feel toward close friends, it is a kind of affection, or *well-liking*. But Kant's distinction between the two kinds of feeling in this case is instructive, and, given the way he explains the terms, less objectionable than it might at first seem.

Kant explains that there are two kinds of (related, but dif-

ferent) feelings that we can have with respect to others. The first is a feeling of well-wishing. "With respect to oneself," he explains, we always wish ourselves well, that is, we always seek our happiness.<sup>62</sup> The second feeling, however, is less common. This is a feeling of well-liking that results when we have a kind of esteem for ourselves for observing and abiding by the moral law. With respect to others, the feelings are essentially parallel. We can have a sense of well-wishing for another—that is, we can hope that they achieve happiness—without having a feeling of well-liking for them. Such a feeling of well-liking for others is "based on the esteem the other has acquired through his characteristics."<sup>63</sup> So, if we have a friend who is imperfect, but who is nevertheless striving to become more virtuous, we might hesitate to say that we have a feeling of well-liking for him (as well-liking is defined here), but nevertheless, we may say that we wish him well. In sum, Kant's claim that friendship involves a feeling of well-wishing adds support to the observation that agents within a moral friendship are far from moral saints.

In this vein, it is also interesting to note that Kant seems to think that, among holy wills, there is no need for moral friendship. Thus, he explains, "friendships are not found in heaven, for heaven is the ultimate in moral perfection, and that is universal; friendship, however, is a special bond between particular persons; in this world only, therefore, it is a recourse for opening one's mind to the other and communing with him, in that here there is a lack of trust among men."<sup>64</sup> Kant sees moral friendship as something that exists (or at least should exist) in this world *precisely because* we are morally imperfect. A few lines later, he adds, "the more civilized men become, the more universal their outlook and the smaller the incidence of special friendships."<sup>65</sup> Still, it seems there is little danger of friend-

62. Ibid., Ak 27:675.

64. Ibid., Ak 27:428.

63. Ibid., Ak 27:676.

65. Ibid.

ship's extinction—even for agents who might have achieved something like temporary moral perfection, there is always the risk of temptation and “backsliding” for embodied creatures like ourselves. Friendship, it would seem, runs little risk of becoming obsolete.

### *A Duty of Friendship*

We are now in a position to see how it is that Kant can say that “human beings have a duty of friendship.”<sup>66</sup> In order to demonstrate precisely how this is the case, it is useful to begin with Kant’s famous classification of duties in the *Groundwork*. There he tells us that along with the perfect duties that we have toward ourselves and others, we also have analogous imperfect duties. That is, we have a duty (that we can fulfill in any number of ways) to perfect our own talents and to promote the happiness of others. I have already suggested that I agree with commentators who say that certain types of friendship are, for Kant, ways in which we can fulfill these imperfect duties. But this, as we have seen, is not Kant’s whole view of friendship. He doesn’t just say that friendship is a *way of fulfilling* duties. He says that friendship *is* a duty.

Of course, friendship is nowhere listed in Kant’s famous taxonomy of duties in the *Groundwork*. But this is not Kant’s only word on what our duties are. Recall that in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant lists two “ends that are also duties”—“one’s own perfection and the happiness of others.”<sup>67</sup> In the discussion of moral friendship, we will be concerned primarily with the first of these ends—that of our own perfection.

When Kant says in the *Metaphysics of Morals* that our own perfection is an end that is also a duty, he is not concerned that we perfect our skill at music or painting. Rather, he says,

66. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:469.

67. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:385–386.

this perfection must be put in what can result from *deeds*, not in mere *gifts* for which he must be indebted to nature. . . . This duty can therefore consist only in *cultivating one's faculties* (or natural predispositions), the highest of which is *understanding*, the faculty of concepts and so too of those concepts that have to do with duty. . . . A human being has a duty to raise himself from the crude state of his nature, from his animality, more and more toward humanity, by which he alone is capable of setting himself ends; he has a duty to diminish his ignorance by instruction and to correct his errors.<sup>68</sup>

The end of perfection that is also our duty is, for Kant, clearly an end of moral perfection. It involves not just the repeated practicing of moral actions, but also the conscious development of a "moral cast of mind" or moral character.<sup>69</sup>

Still, we have no specific mention of a duty of friendship, but with the duty of self-perfection we have one more step of the argument in place. In fact, the duty of self-perfection and the duty of friendship come hand in hand, since, friendship (as we have seen) is a means to self-examination and self-perfection, and, as Kant points out in the *Groundwork*, to will an end means also to will the means to that end.<sup>70</sup> Taken by itself, however, this line of argument would be too quick, since Kant also tells us in the *Metaphysics of Morals* that our own perfection is a duty of "wide" obligation (as opposed to a duty of "narrow" obligation). According to Kant, duties of wide obligation—like imperfect duties—are "duties that prescribe the maxim of actions, not the actions themselves" or that leave "playroom for free choice in following the law."<sup>71</sup> This would suggest that even moral friendship is, once again, simply one way among many to fulfill our duty of moral perfection. A person who is not inclined to develop a friendship with another individual could, for example, pursue a career studying moral philosophy instead.

68. Ibid., Ak 6:387.

69. Ibid.

70. Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:417–418.

71. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:390.

However, there is one aspect of this duty of moral perfection that, I contend, is not open to such latitude or playroom when it comes to choosing one's actions. One necessary component of the process of self-perfection, it seems, is the ability to honestly and objectively assess one's virtue and moral shortcomings. A precondition of moral improvement is knowing just which aspects of our character need to be improved. And this is one thing that Kant tells us repeatedly we cannot do alone. While our real motivations will forever remain obscure (even to ourselves), we can overcome our tendency toward "arrogance" and "despondency" only with the help of another person. Again, however, we cannot overcome these dangers of subjectivity with the help of *any* person. Rather, this requires a very specific type of relationship—a moral friendship—in which individuals can disclose their thoughts without fear of judgment. Here, then, is the source for Kant's claim that we have a duty of friendship, and that friendship makes us "worthy of happiness." Our end of self-perfection requires an objective assessment of virtue, and this can be safely satisfied only by a moral friendship.

### *Conclusion*

Throughout the preceding discussion, it has become clear that, contrary to the criticisms mentioned at the outset, Kant does, in fact have a robust account of friendship that does not conflict with his broader moral theory. Indeed, it is a crucial part of our moral improvement. Seen in this light, we might even formulate a Kantian maxim to emphasize friendship's compatibility with even the most formal reading of Kant's ethics. Thus, the maxim "in order to promote others' ends, as well as my own moral virtue, I will develop friendships with other people of my choosing" seems entirely universalizable.

However, a final objection perhaps remains. Recall that

we started this discussion of friendship in Kant's ethics with the worry that true friendship is not accounted for by a Kantian ethic. I hope to have shown that Kant has a great deal to say about friendship, and that, rather than being a relationship that is inimical to the Kantian account of morality, it is instead an essential tool in bringing about the object of moral action. Nevertheless, it still remains open to critics to wonder just how satisfying such an account of friendship really is. In other words, we might wonder if this account of friendship still leaves us with a picture of the relationship that is, in a crucial sense, "cold and calculating." We want to think, perhaps, that we develop friendships with people not because they are useful to our achieving moral perfection, but rather because we like them, or because we share common experiences. In sum, one might object, Kant might have an account of friendship, but it is an account of a kind of friendship that is utterly foreign to what we think of when we think of the relationship.

In response to this objection, it is important to keep in mind the difference between the object of Kantian friendship and the immediate motivating ground of that friendship. That these can be kept separate is crucial to answering this objection and maintaining that friendship, as we know it, is central to Kant's account of morality. To cultivate a friendship like the ones Kant describes just is to cultivate a friendship of the sort that we tend to think of (of course, Kant's account is an ideal of this type of relationship). Were a person to cultivate a relationship with another person with the explicit motivation of perfecting herself morally, she would undoubtedly find herself in a friendship that did not help her achieve her goals. This is because the Kantian friendship, while ultimately helping us perfect ourselves morally, always is defined by its mutual love and respect, and not by what each party can gain from the other. We receive the benefits of moral improvement, that is, only when we enter into and participate in the friendship unselfishly.

In sum, then, it is crucial to remember that participants in Kant's moral friendship are, importantly, *not* Kantian saints. Rather, they are imperfect moral agents who nonetheless strive for moral perfection. Because of the unique nature of moral friendship, a relationship where participants can be, to a certain extent, released from fear of judgment or comparison, it is an ideal setting for moral self-examination. It provides a level of objectivity and thus guards against the twin dangers of "despondency" and "arrogance" that result when examination is undertaken in isolation. As a relationship of mutual trust between imperfect agents who nonetheless share a reverence for the moral law, moral friendship allows its participants to engage in moral self-examination while avoiding the dangers associated with our predisposition to humanity. Moral friendship is thus a crucial, though often overlooked, part of the Kantian agent's life—and, of course, our progress toward the highest good.



CIVIL SOCIETY  
AND THE HIGHEST GOOD



THIS CHAPTER examines the ways in which participation in civil society can further a community's progress toward the highest good by contributing either to greater virtue or to greater happiness among a society's members. Correspondingly, the discussion is divided into two main sections. First, I examine Kant's account of a system of externally coercible laws and argue that, in limiting agents' external freedoms so that these freedoms are consistent with one another, such a system of law promotes happiness in a way that is consistent with Kant's account of the highest good. Second, I examine Kant's account of a republican constitution and argue that the requirements of participation in such a government encourage citizens to practice important skills of practical reasoning (and, indeed, reasoning in general)—specifically, thinking for oneself and thinking from the standpoint of others. Mastering these skills of practical reasoning is an essential component in developing a more virtuous character.

*A System of Externally Coercible Laws*

The claim that a system of externally coercible laws can contribute to the highest good may come as some surprise. After all, if we are to understand the highest good as a kind of ethical community comprised of agents motivated by respect for the moral law, then any discussion of a system of law backed

by the threat of force seems out of place. Citizens who limit the external use of their freedom in accord with such laws act, in Kantian terms, with *legality* but not with *morality*. Such individuals are able to limit the use of their freedom out of a recognition of the threat of punishment, but they do not act out of respect for the moral law, nor do they adopt the ends of others in constructing their maxims. And, for these reasons, a society governed by a system of externally coercible law can never be an ethical community. Indeed, in the *Religion* Kant tells us that members of this kind of political community are still in an “ethical state of nature.”<sup>1</sup> And yet, in the same discussion in *Religion* Kant tells us that “without the foundation of a political community, [an ethical community] could never be brought into existence by human beings.”<sup>2</sup> So, while a political community can never be identical with an ethical community, Kant does seem to think of the political community as a key predecessor to the ethical community. This section explores Kant’s reasons for making such a claim. I argue that part of the reason that Kant is justified in making this claim is that the existence of a political community—in particular, a system of externally coercible laws—ensures the necessary background conditions for a transition into an ethical community. Specifically, it provides some assurance to members of a community that it is “safe” to pursue their own virtue. And it ensures (to the extent that this is possible) that individuals’ pursuit of happiness will not be thwarted, thus allowing happiness to follow from virtue, to some extent at least.

First, however, it would be useful to explore briefly Kant’s account of law and allowable coercion. Here, a natural place to begin is with the “Universal Principle of Right” that Kant puts forward in the “Doctrine of Right.” Kant’s Universal Principle of Right is: “An action is *right* if it can coexist with everyone’s

1. Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Ak 6:95.

2. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:94.

freedom in accordance with a universal law, or if on its maxim the freedom of choice of each can coexist with everyone's freedom in accordance with a universal law."<sup>3</sup> Though there is some debate about Kant's derivation of his principle,<sup>4</sup> it seems to follow fairly easily from Kant's well-known commitments to freedom in his moral philosophy. If we grant Kant's claims about the central value of freedom, we are left with a question with regard to our interaction with other free agents: how are we to conduct ourselves so that the freedom of each can coexist with the freedom of others?

In this context, it is important to point out that there are two distinct, but related, senses in which we can think of our freedom. The first of these is to think of freedom in terms of the internal use of freedom. This use of freedom concerns both our capacity to choose ends for ourselves and our capacity to adopt one or both of the necessary ends that Kant discusses in the "Doctrine of Virtue." The second use of freedom concerns how we go about pursuing the ends that we set for ourselves; this is the external use of our freedom. The concept of right,

3. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:230.

4. A lengthy discussion of the debate over the source of the Universal Principle of Right is beyond the scope of this chapter, but, briefly, it is a debate that stems from Kant's claim in the "Doctrine of Right" that the principle is "analytic" (Ak 6:396) and a "postulate that is incapable of further proof" (Ak 6:231). Allen Wood, for example, has argued that Kant's claim must mean that the Principle of Right is entirely divorced from Kant's moral theory (specifically, the categorical imperative and Kant's claims about the value of freedom). (See Wood, "The Final Form of Kant's Practical Philosophy," 1–21.) Responses to this type of claim tend to focus on detailing Kant's use of the analytic/synthetic distinction and arguing that Kant's claim about analyticity should not be read as a claim that the Universal Principle of Right proves its truth out of strict containment. (See Guyer, "Kant's Deductions of the Principles of Right," 23–64.) Similarly, Leslie Mulholland suggests that Kant's principle might be considered analytic because it deals with the external, and not the internal, use of freedom (a distinction I explain below). Given that this is the case, he argues, Kant's claims about analyticity might just have to do with the fact that no further end is posited in the external use of freedom as it is in its internal use. (See Leslie Mulholland, *Kant's System of Rights* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1990], 169–70.)

according to Kant, has only to do with this latter, external use of freedom. As Kant puts it, a doctrine of right is the “sum of those laws for which an external lawgiving is possible.”<sup>5</sup> Since such lawgiving is impossible when it comes to the ends we set for ourselves (these ends being, by definition, internal and private), a doctrine of right can concern itself only with our external use of freedom, or the ways in which we pursue our freely chosen ends.

From here, Kant claims, we are only a few analytically true (Kant says true by the “principle of contradiction”) premises away from a theory about the appropriate uses of coercion in a system of right. This is Kant’s famous claim that a hindrance to a hindrance is, in fact, a promotion of the thing being hindered, in this case freedom: “Whatever is wrong is a hindrance to freedom in accordance with universal laws. But coercion is a hindrance or resistance to freedom. Therefore, if a certain use of freedom is itself a hindrance to freedom in accordance with universal laws (i.e. wrong), coercion that is opposed to this (as a *hindering of a hindrance to freedom*) is . . . right.”<sup>6</sup>

However, it is not immediately clear that Kant’s “hindrance principle” really follows from the principle of right by the principle of noncontradiction alone. This is because it seems to be a matter of empirical investigation whether a particular instance of coercion will actually serve to promote the freedom being hindered.<sup>7</sup> And Kant himself acknowledges that in at least one set of cases, coercion will not be sufficient to hinder a hindrance. This is the set of cases that Kant categorizes under the heading of “the right of necessity.”<sup>8</sup> In these cases, the agent cannot be coerced by the threat of punishment, since such punishment does not offer a compelling reason to refrain

5. *Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:229.

6. *Ibid.*, Ak 6:231.

7. See Guyer, “Kant’s Deductions of the Principles of Right,” 50–51.

8. *Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:235.

from action. So, for example, the victims of a shipwreck cannot be coerced to refrain from sacrificing others to save their own lives, since any consequence of breaking the law could not actually be worse than the consequence of not taking the last life vest.

But even if Kant's "hindrance principle" does not follow *analytically* from the principle of right, it certainly seems to follow with the addition of some relatively uncontroversial empirical premises about the likelihood that external coercion will, in fact, keep individuals from hindering others' use of their freedom. And once Kant's principle of reciprocal coercion is in place, we have all the apparatus we need to fully defend Kant's system of externally coercible law. Briefly, we are entitled to influence others' external use of freedom through coercion (usually understood as the threat of punishment) if that use of freedom would interfere with others' legitimate use of their external freedom.<sup>9</sup>

We come, then, to the question at issue in this section of our discussion. How might a system of externally coercible laws contribute to the accomplishment of the highest good? On the face of things, these laws seem to be a kind of stopgap measure, ensuring that, at the very least, my lawful use of freedom won't be hindered by someone else's illegitimate use of freedom. Far from being a vehicle for bringing about the highest good, these laws seem just to ensure a minimal condition of civic peace. And there is some truth to this observation, in the sense that a system of externally coercible laws cannot contribute directly to an individual's (or a community's) virtue. As we have already seen, such a system of law concerns itself only with individuals' external use of their freedom. Since such laws do not—and

9. There is, of course, one exception to the claim that we are legitimated in hindering any use of freedom that hinders another's legitimate use of freedom, and that is the case of punishment itself. Again, Kant simply needs to add a premise to this effect.

indeed cannot—have anything to say about the internal use of freedom, they will not be able to have a direct influence on an individual's virtue.

Still, despite the fact that such a system of law cannot have a direct effect on individuals' virtue, we can nevertheless make the case that a system of law backed by force might actually have an indirect beneficial effect on virtue. This is because in a society that lacks such a system of law, acting virtuously out of respect for the moral law can often be a risky policy. So, for example, if theft runs rampant in a society because of a lack of a deterrent force, then an honest person stands to suffer doubly, as it were. First, she is susceptible to being the victim of theft; but second, her moral choice itself puts her at a disadvantage.

Now, this might seem like a strange claim to make in the context of a discussion of Kantian ethics. After all, the moral law that makes itself apparent to us through our use of pure practical reason does not make exceptions because there will be inconvenient or unpleasant results of following the law, or because it would unfairly disadvantage a person to be the only moral individual in a corrupt society. These social circumstances might make it more difficult to be virtuous, and they may provide us with many inclinations to conform to the prevailing corruption, but we will still recognize the bindingness of moral obligation, and that obligation will remain the same.

But recall that, on my interpretation of Kant's concept of the highest good, we are not simply concerned with knowing what our obligations are and fulfilling these obligations in spite of inclination. We are, rather, concerned with achieving a kind of society or community that might aid in individuals' moral development and improvement. And when we shift our focus from the obligations that exist for individual agents to an investigation of what kinds of conditions will make virtuous action more likely on the whole, then facts about the difficulties in making moral choices in corrupt conditions become imme-

diately relevant. In other words, despite the fact that a person's corrupt surroundings will generally serve as no excuse for her wrongdoing, we can still consistently ask ourselves what kinds of conditions are more likely to bring about virtuous action.<sup>10</sup>

A system of law backed by the threat of force can, then, contribute to the accomplishment of the highest good in at least this way—it can help provide background conditions that make virtuous action easier, or less risky. But it can also contribute to the highest good by promoting the other component of this end of moral action—that is, it can help contribute to the happiness of moral agents. A group of people with a system of law in place will be, on the whole, happier than a group without such a system in place. But in advancing this argument, an important distinction should be made.

First, there is the sense in which a system of law should *not* be said to have an effect on happiness within the highest good. It would be misleading, at the very least, to say that there are two “halves” of the highest good—virtue and happiness—and that these should be independently maximized (the latter, of course, only insofar as it is consistent with the former). If this were the case, we might think that a system of laws could play a role in bringing about at least a part of the highest good by promoting the happiness component of the equation, independent of the virtue of the members of that society. But claiming such a relationship between a system of law and happiness would seriously alter what I take to be Kant's concept of the highest good. Indeed, rather than casting the highest good as the state of affairs that obtains when happiness follows systematically from virtue, such an interpretation would seem to take us back to earlier versions of Kant's concept of the highest good, in

10. Compare our earlier discussion of moral education: education was not, on that account, a necessary condition for moral action. But it is still centrally important to the discussion of the highest good and the ethical community because of its efficacy in developing moral character.

which happiness is a kind of disconnected “reward” for virtue. But, as I have argued, this is neither the most consistent nor the most plausible interpretation of Kant’s concept of the highest good. And it is certainly not the version of the highest good that Kant ultimately settles upon. Kant’s goal is not to simply maximize virtue and happiness as separate variables. Rather, it is to maximize virtue with the realization that doing so will, on the whole, *bring about* greater happiness. The distinction between the two accounts of the highest good is subtle, but important. It would, therefore, be unwise to say that a system of law contributes to the highest good simply because individuals within such a system are, in general, happier.

Still, there is a way in which a system of externally coercible laws can contribute to the happiness that is part of the highest good, understood in this systematic way. This more accurate picture, then, is one in which such a system of law hinders agents and actions that would come between other agents’ virtuous actions and the happiness that should, quite naturally, follow from such action. So, for example, among a group of virtuous agents, all of whom are internally motivated to respect each others’ ends, it should follow that the ends of each member will, in general, come closer to being fulfilled than if such virtuous conditions did not obtain. In reality, of course, it is difficult to find a group of people who are all motivated by the moral law, and, unfortunately, one often finds individuals or groups who are willing to take advantage of others’ virtue. With such “defectors” in the midst of a group of virtuous agents, it becomes less and less likely that happiness will follow from virtue. The purpose, then, of a system of law backed up by the threat of punishment is not to make these “defectors” virtuous, but just to deter them from taking advantage of their virtuous cohorts so that happiness may flow more easily from virtue.

This, then, is the sense in which a system of externally coercible laws might help bring about part of the highest good



by promoting the happiness of a community of agents. But we might also be tempted to think that there is also a limited sense in which such a system might *indirectly* foster virtue itself. Elsewhere Kant claims that forcing oneself to practice certain actions might eventually have an effect on one's motivational structure. For example, Kant tells us that even if I cannot be moved by a feeling of "love" to be beneficent toward my neighbor, I still ought to practice the "conduct" of beneficence.<sup>11</sup> In time, such beneficent conduct might very well contribute to an ability to practice real beneficence. We might think that something similar could be said for following the law. So, for example, in a note on political philosophy, Kant claims that "people can become ever better through a just government, through a good rule [*Regel*] the obstacles to its execution can become ever smaller; but if the rule is absurdly made or distorted, it destroys the good."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps, then, following a good rule has a similar effect as forcing oneself to be beneficent—over time, the motivations for the action become more internalized until the law, like the effort of beneficence, is no longer necessary.

But there is an important difference between the two cases. In the case of the beneficent act, my action is still motivated by my awareness of the moral law and, specifically, my awareness of the imperfect duty I have to further other individuals' happiness. In that case, it is not moral motivation that I cultivate with benevolent actions, but rather the feeling of love. On the other hand, when I follow a law out of a fear of punishment, my motivation is decidedly not moral. And it is hard to see how Kant could tell a story about how repeated, externally coerced action might lead to true moral motivation. Certainly, Kant

11. *Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:401.

12. Immanuel Kant, *Fragments on Political Philosophy*, in *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Akademie edition, ed. Königlichen Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 19 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and predecessors, 1902–), R 7721. Translations of Kant's fragments on political philosophy are my own.

could not appeal to the effects of habituation. An action done out of habit is just as far removed from true moral motivation as an action done out of fear of punishment.

Perhaps, then, as Kant hints in the fragment above, the link between coercion and moral motivation has to do with removing impediments to moral action, or making it easier to fulfill one's duty. As I have argued above, there is perhaps a limited sense in which this could be the case. But we need to proceed with caution: an action's virtue is not, for Kant, determined by the difficulty an agent has in overcoming opposing inclinations, nor can we make an agent more virtuous simply by taking away various inclinations that stand in the way of virtuous action. But, again, if we are concerned with discovering the conditions under which virtue and the highest good are more likely, then perhaps this interpretation of Kant's statement is available to us.

But there is another sense in which Kant can say that we "can become ever better through a just government." This sense has to do with Kant's account of a republican constitution and, specifically, the requirements of participation in a republican government. In the following sections, I sketch an account of how participation in such government might, in fact, help us become more virtuous.

### *Moral Virtue and the Republican Constitution*

The second component of Kant's civil condition that has an influence on our progress toward the highest good is our participation in a republican government. Kant's sketch of such participation places a great emphasis on publicity and public participation. This emphasis, in turn, will have a beneficial effect on citizens' skills of practical reason. Specifically, an agent who participates in a republican government will be more able to think for himself and think from the standpoint of others,

two virtues of thought that Kant repeatedly emphasizes as essential to our capacity for moral reasoning, and, indeed, reasoning in general.<sup>13</sup> The following discussion presents, first, a brief overview of the relevant features of Kant's account of republican government. It then explores the requirements of publicity and criticism in more detail, and, finally, concludes by demonstrating how these features of publicity and criticism have an important and beneficial effect on moral reasoning. Specifically, the requirements of publicity and criticism help guard against two dangerous errors in our moral reasoning—logical egoism and the prejudice of imitation.

In "Theory and Practice," Kant claims that a just civil society must be based on three foundational principles. First, the "freedom of every member of the society as a human being"; second, the member's "equality with every other as a *subject*"; and, finally, "the *independence* of every member of a commonwealth as a citizen."<sup>14</sup> Kant says that any "rightful condition . . . is based *a priori*" on these principles. By this, Kant seems to mean that we cannot even conceive of a just constitution without including these three principles in its foundation. Again, given Kant's commitments in his moral philosophy, this claim stands to reason. Any just civil condition would have to be one in which members are treated as free and equal, and it would

13. In fact, these virtues of thought make up part of a triad that Kant mentions in several works: first, the ability to think for oneself, second the ability to think from the standpoint of others, and, finally, the ability to think consistently, or "in agreement with oneself." See, for example, Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Logic*, trans. Michael J. Young (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Ak 24:57. On the importance of these virtues of thought when it comes to constructing certain standards of reasoning see Onora O'Neill, "The Public Use of Reason," in *Constructions of Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 28–50. On the importance of the social use of reason when it comes to overcoming radical evil, see Philip J. Rossi, S.J., *The Social Authority of Reason* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

14. Kant, "On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory but Is of No Use in Practice," Ak 8:290.

have to be one in which their capacity to set ends is respected politically.<sup>15</sup>

So what kind of government reflects these three foundational principles? Most important from the perspective of this discussion is the fact that Kant has in mind a representative government. Of course this does not necessarily mean that all the members of a given community will be voting participants in the government. Rather, it means—minimally—that the laws created and enforced in a republic will be those that reflect the will of the people. As Kant puts it in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, “Any true republic is and can only be a *system representing* the people, in order to protect its rights by name, by all the citizens united and acting through their delegates. . . . For in it (the people) is originally found the supreme authority from which all rights of individuals as mere subjects (and in any event as officials of the state) must be derived.”<sup>16</sup>

To be fair, there is a good deal of ambiguity in Kant’s account between a kind of “ideal theory” of republican government, where such representation exists as a crucial component, and a kind of nonideal theory, in which Kant acknowledges that most governments fall short of such an ideal.<sup>17</sup> So, for example, in the essay “An Old Question Raised Again” Kant makes a distinction between the “Platonic ideal” of republican government (the so-called *respublica noumenon*) and the example of such a republic that we find “in our experience” (unsurprisingly dubbed the *respublica phenomenon*). He acknowledges that the former “can be acquired only painfully,” after a series of struggles. Furthermore, he makes suggestions for rulers whose societies have not yet reached this best of all constitutions: “Conse-

15. See Howard Williams, *Kant’s Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 128–129.

16. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:341.

17. Williams, *Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 179. See also Wolfgang Kersting, “Kant’s Concept of the State,” in *Essays on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Howard Williams, 143–165 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), at 160.

quently, it is a duty to enter into such a system of government, but it is provisionally the duty of the monarchs, if they rule as *autocrats*, to govern in a *republican* (not democratic) way, that is, to treat people according to principles which are commensurate with the spirit of laws of freedom (as a nation with mature understanding would prescribe them for itself) although they would not be literally canvassed for their consent.”<sup>18</sup>

But whether a government is organized according to the ideal or the nonideal model, a clear requirement of Kant’s republican constitution is that it protect the rights of “all the citizens.” Kant makes it clear that a republican government it is not one in which a special subset, or even the majority, of the people are represented. Rather, a republican constitution represents the united will of the people, or the will of all. So, for example, in one of his fragments on moral and political philosophy, Kant explains: “Society cannot decide on its general objects by means of the majority of voices; it can only proceed from the general, hence there are laws. (The whole decides over the whole; the whole minus a part is not the whole.) . . . In voting, society is viewed as a person and the members as particular wills and inclinations of that person.”<sup>19</sup> The idea that the legislators must make laws that reflect the will of the entire people will be a crucial one in the discussion of this section. For one thing, it means that citizens in a republic should think of themselves as part of a unity or “individual.” This way of thinking will ultimately have an impact on our ability to reason about the requirements of morality, and thus on our ability to make moral decisions.<sup>20</sup>

18. Immanuel Kant, “An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?” in *Kant: On History*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Prentice Hall, 1963), Ak 7:91.

19. *Fragments on Political Philosophy*, Ak R7529.

20. It is important at this stage to point out that Kant’s insistence on laws that reflect the general will does not imply an endorsement of democracy. In fact, Kant’s view is that democracy is actually more likely to be a despotism than a

In sum, then, Kant's conception of a republican constitution involves a crucial component of consultation and consent. In nonideal scenarios, this requirement is reflected in Kant's insistence that monarchs at least think from the standpoint of their subjects. In what we might term Kant's "ideal theory," this requirement is reflected in the idea that some citizens, at least, will be consulted in the construction of law. This consultation requirement means that there will be an important element of publicity within Kant's ideal republican constitution. It also suggests that free and open criticism and communication will be a necessary part of public life. These two facts, in turn, will have an important effect on the moral development of the participants of Kant's ideal political society. The following section highlights these two requirements of public participation and demonstrates their effects on moral reasoning—and thus moral virtue and the highest good.

### *Publicity*

Legislators in a Kantian republic must make legislation that reflects the interests of the whole. To this end, Kant suggests the "transcendental formula of public right," which states, "All actions relating to the rights of others are wrong if their maxim is incompatible with publicity."<sup>21</sup> A few things should be noted about Kant's formula of publicity. First, the ability to make a proposed action public is not sufficient for judging that action as right or reflective of the general will. So, Kant explains, the "principle is . . . only *negative*, that is, it serves only for cognizing by means of it what is *not right* toward others."<sup>22</sup> A despot could, for example, publicize an unjust law, knowing

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republican government. As far as Kant is concerned, the will of the entire people can be reflected in the laws even though the entire citizenry does not actively participate in forming legislation.

21. Kant, "On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory but Is of No Use in Practice," Ak 8:381.

22. *Ibid.*

that his subjects have no ability to speak out against his chosen policy. Kant's point here is just that if a law or proposed law *can't* be made public, then it does not reflect the will of all subjects.

The second thing to note about Kant's formula of publicity is its similarity to other, more explicitly moral, formulas in Kant's practical philosophy. The idea that one should act only on a maxim that could be consented to by others is, of course, a major theme in Kant's moral philosophy. And Kant acknowledges the similarity between the moral and political importance of consent when, in describing the requirement of publicity, he observes that "this principle is not to be regarded as *ethical only* (belonging to the doctrine of virtue) but also as *juridical* (bearing upon the right of human beings)."<sup>23</sup> Of course, the similarity between the moral and political when it comes to publicity should probably not come as too much of a surprise. After all, in both cases, we are concerned with making each person's use of his freedom consistent with everyone else's, and an important stage in this process is making one's maxim a matter of public scrutiny, or at least thinking as if one's maxim were a matter of public scrutiny. The important difference, however, between the moral case and the political case is, of course, that in the political case we are concerned not with the internal use of freedom, or the ends that we set for ourselves, but rather the external use of freedom, that is, the way we go about pursuing those ends. This, in turn, makes an important difference when it comes to our duties of publicity. In the moral case, we have an obligation to think as if our maxims were public, but there is no strict duty actually to obtain consent for the ends we set. Certainly, we will need to consult with others in order to discern how our ends might conflict with theirs, and there might be cases in which a preexisting duty or relation-

23. Ibid.

ship dictates that we seek actual consent before setting an end. But, in general, I do not need to “canvass” fellow citizens for consent, for example, to pursue a talent in painting.<sup>24</sup>

The case is importantly different when it comes to making legislation that describes how we make use of our external freedoms. When citizens act as legislators whose job it is to determine how people’s external freedoms should be used and limited, they have an added responsibility to first inquire about the ends and needs of others and, then, to construct legislation that can be accepted by all. In an important sense, then, public participation forces consultation and consent out into the open. Of course, each member of society is still not literally asked to consent to legislation. Kant’s test of publicity is, first and foremost, a hypothetical test, and even so, he maintains a notable silent majority. But precisely because the political form of consent seeking is concerned with the external uses of freedom, there is a sense in which consent will be a more public matter than it is in the moral case. So, to follow on the example in the previous paragraph, while I may not need anyone’s actual consent to set an end to become a painter, I will need some kind of consent to, say, appropriate space for a studio or traverse a field in order to paint a landscape.

Even with these caveats in mind, however, it might still seem that the claim that public life *forces consent out into the open* is a rather strong one. After all, when we think of our everyday existence in political society, we do not, perhaps, think

24. On this issue, see Katerina Deligiorgi, “Universalisability, Publicity, and Communication: Kant’s Conception of Reason,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2002): 143–159. Deligiorgi claims that “the demands of universalisability and publicity cannot be met by one person reasoning alone” (143). Insofar as this claim has to do with discerning the ends and needs of others, I think this is true. But if her claim is a stronger one about actual consent, then I disagree. In general, I agree with Deligiorgi about the role of publicity in applying practical reason, but we clearly differ on the role that political participation plays. She focuses on Kant’s nonideal theory, and so concludes that the general will does not play the central role that I claim it does (see 147–148).



of ourselves as constantly seeking consent or being forced to think from the standpoint of others. It will be worth our while, for this reason, to survey the different levels of participation available to members of a Kantian republic in order to determine the extent to which such participation is a feature of these individuals' lives.<sup>25</sup>

The requirements of publicity and consent seeking are strongest for monarchs and legislators in a republican constitution. These individuals are charged with devising legislation that reflects the will of all, and must therefore adopt a "patriotic" way of thinking. Their proposed legislation must, therefore, pass the test of the "transcendental formula of public right." Still, monarchs and legislators (even in an ideal republic) do not need to seek and receive actual consent from their citizens for their proposed legislation. Indeed, we might worry that legislators' seeking *actual* consent might run the risk of leading to a host of private interests competing for representation in legislation. But the requirement of publicity does not ask legislators to obtain the approval of as many private interests as possible. Rather, it asks legislators to seek consent (often merely hypothetical consent) from citizens in those citizens' capacity as free and equal members of a society.

So there is a sense in which legislators can reason about and seek consent merely through the use of a set of rational principles about the freedom and equality of citizens. After all, the transcendental formula of public right does not ask legislators to actually publish proposed legislation and then wait a determinate amount of time in order to hear objections. Rather, it is a kind of hypothetical test that prevents legislators from devising laws that could not withstand the scrutiny and consent of free and rational citizens. But while the duties of publicity and

25. I am grateful to Jennifer Uleman and Lara Denis for pointing out to me this worry (and those that follow in the next paragraphs) at the Central Division Meetings of the American Philosophical Association in February 2009.

consent that legislators have *can be thought of* in terms of rational consent, it is also important to note that it would in most cases be prudent—and in many cases necessary—for monarchs and legislators to familiarize themselves with the ends that citizens actually have. Very few laws—even in a Kantian republic—are concerned only with preserving freedom and equality in an abstract sense. Rather, they are often concerned with promoting and making consistent the ends that citizens have. As a result, it will be crucial for legislators to be familiar with these ends, the ways these ends come into conflict with one another, and the circumstances in which agents set these ends. Thus, while the transcendental formula of public right can be thought of as a purely rational test, a well-functioning legislative body will necessarily be involved in at least some empirical investigation (as Kant says, “canvassing”) of citizens’ ends.

It is also important to point out that not every active (i.e., voting) citizen in a Kantian republic will be involved in devising legislation. In terms of participation, many active citizens will simply have the role of electing those legislators whose task it is to make laws that reflect the will of all. In other words, there will be a portion of the citizenry that, while entitled to participate in the legislative process, will participate in only this limited manner. This, in turn, has some potential implications for the claim that public participation forces our ability to think from the standpoint of others “out into the open.” In short, it seems like this will be more true of legislators who make laws on a day-to-day basis than it will be of citizens who simply elect those legislators. Certainly, when it comes to the important task of choosing the legislators who will represent them and make laws that reflect the general will, these active citizens will have the opportunity to practice their capacity to think from the standpoint of others. But these will be isolated instances compared with the opportunities for such reasoning that actual legislators have.

And, of course, Kant famously limits political participation to adult men who are their “own masters.”<sup>26</sup> That is, as Kant puts it, an individual who participates in the political realm must have some “property (and any art, craft, fine art, or science can be counted as property) that supports him—that is, if he must acquire from others in order to live, he does so only by *alienating* what is *his* and not by giving others permission to make use of his powers—and hence [the requisite quality is] that, in the strict sense of the word, he *serves* no one other than the commonwealth.” Kant’s reasoning here seems to be that it is impossible for an individual who serves someone other than the commonwealth (be it a husband or a master) to make political decisions that are not influenced in some respect by that relationship of servitude. Kant calls these dependent members of society “passive citizens” since they cannot actively participate in choosing legislators or devising legislation.<sup>27</sup> Still, Kant says, these “passive citizens” maintain their status as human beings. And those active members of society who do participate in legislating must devise legislation that reflects and promotes their freedom and equality.

Kant’s restriction of political participation is a problem, especially since, as I am arguing, it deprives nonparticipants of an important venue for critical, public thought, and this in turn deprives those citizens of a crucial opportunity to develop their skills of practical reasoning. But even these passive citizens have some limited opportunities to participate in public life in a way that forces them to think from the standpoint of others. The first of these is in the attitude that these members (along with everyone else in their society) take toward their government and society. As we saw in the preceding section, the monarch or ruler in Kant’s conception of a republican gov-

26. “On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory but Is of No Use in Practice,” Ak 8:295.

27. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:314–315.

ernment was required to think “patriotically” and enforce laws that reflect the general will. However, Kant also thinks of patriotism as a virtue among the *citizens* of a republican government. As Kant explains later in the discussion of patriotism in “Theory and Practice,” “In a *patriotic* way of thinking everyone in a state . . . regards the commonwealth as the maternal womb, or the country as the paternal land, from which and on which he has arisen and which he must also leave behind as a cherished pledge, only so as to consider himself authorized to protect its rights by the laws of the common will.”<sup>28</sup> Every person in a Kantian republic—from passive citizen to active legislator—can have this kind of patriotic relationship with his or her political community. And this kind of patriotism is not marked by a kind of isolated nationalism or insular attitude. Rather, it is defined by a capacity to think about the “common will.”<sup>29</sup>

Still, of course, many citizens are not *required* to adopt this patriotic way of thinking. It seems, if anything, to be an ideal toward which Kant thinks we ought to strive in order to maintain a well-functioning government that respects the rights of each of its members. But there is in Kant’s discussion of patriotism a hint of another way in which all citizens are forced (in a limited way) to think from the standpoint of others. This

28. “On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory but Is of No Use in Practice,” Ak 8:291.

29. It is also interesting to note that in both discussions of patriotism (the patriotism of the monarch and the patriotism of individual citizens) Kant suggests that when we think from the standpoint of others, we ought not only think from the standpoint of our contemporaries, but also from the standpoint of future generations of citizens. This stands to reason, since, as should be clear by now, Kant thinks that legislation should not be devised to represent the interests of any particular will. And a particular will need not be the interest of a single person; it could just as well refer to the interest of a group of people. Kant’s point here, then, seems to be that we should avoid thinking from the particular will of one group of people in particular, namely the group of people who happen to be in existence right now. This, in turn, provides further evidence for a kind of “historical” reading of Kant’s ideas about moral progress. There is no reason to think that the people alive right now hold any kind of privileged position, either with respect to potential legislation or with respect to moral progress.

is the sense in which, when any of us undertakes an action in the public sphere, we are bound by a set of preexisting laws. Whether this means keeping one's dog on a leash or maintaining a certain speed on residential roads, the laws that all citizens—even passive citizens—come across every day reflect the wills of other members of society. Certainly, we often ignore these laws; and even when we follow them, we ignore the fact that they are in place because we must find a way to make our freedoms consistent with one another. But this, at least, is a minimal sense in which published and publicly known laws provide a mechanism through which we are confronted with the will of others on a regular basis.

Finally, there is also a sense in which living in society with others will, according to Kant, force agents to confront the wills of others. But here we need to tread carefully with respect to the claims we make. In his essay “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim,” Kant argues that social forces involving comparison or “unsocial sociability” actually spur progress in culture and politics over the course of many generations.<sup>30</sup> In general, I have avoided discussing Kant's essays on history in this book, primarily because of their empirical focus on the causality of nature. Kant's argument, in other words, is that the forces of nature and human psychology actually cause us to become more civilized and well-ordered, despite the fact that we rarely notice this fact, and despite the fact that our individual moral choices may not point in the same direction. Over the course of this book, however, my focus has been on the social forces that enable us to improve *morally*, typically by allowing us to improve our methods of moral reason-

30. Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim,” in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, trans. Allen Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). See especially Kant's “fourth proposition,” where he claims that “the means nature employs in order to bring about the development of all its predispositions is their *antagonism* in society, insofar as the latter is in the end the cause of their lawful order.”

ing. In general, then, I have made sparing use of Kant's essays on history.

There is, however, a sense in which Kant's essay on universal history can help us in this discussion. In Kant's discussion of the mechanisms by which society civilizes us, he makes several important observations about how living in society with others influences our moral reasoning itself. So, for example, Kant claims that our natural tendency of unsocial sociability, or our tendency to seek society while at the same time seeking prominence, forces us to recognize the fact that other wills are just as strong as ours. We thus experience "resistance everywhere."<sup>31</sup> And a few paragraphs later, Kant revisits one of his favored metaphors about living in society with others: "Yet in such a precinct as civil union is, these same [selfish] inclinations have afterward their best effect; just as trees in a forest, precisely because each of them seeks to take air and sun from the other, are constrained to look for them above themselves, and thereby achieve a beautiful straight growth."<sup>32</sup> So far Kant's claim is a familiar one in the essays on history and culture—when free, self-interested agents find themselves living in society, they are essentially forced to apply order to their situation, lest each person's individual striving combine into a chaotic whole. But a closer inspection of these passages suggests that there may be something deeper going on. Both of these passages bear a striking resemblance to claims that Kant makes in the lectures on pedagogy.<sup>33</sup> There is, then, a sense in which living in society with others serves a kind of educative function when it comes to moral reasoning. When we live in society with others, we begin to recognize that others' wills can often come into conflict with our own, and we begin to see that we will have to think from their standpoint in order to come to the appropriate moral conclusions. There is even some sugges-

31. *Ibid.*, Ak 8:21.

32. *Ibid.*, Ak 8:22.

33. See *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Ak 9:454.

tion in the essay on universal history for this interpretation. Kant describes this process as affecting the “inner formation [*Bildung*] of . . . citizens’ mode of thought.”<sup>34</sup> The use of the word *Bildung* certainly bears some resemblance to Kant’s discussion on pedagogy, though—to be fair—the term can refer to formation in general. More telling, however, is the reference to a “mode of thought” here. Kant’s suggestion seems to be that the experience of resistance and social tension can be a particularly informative experience when it comes to the way we develop our moral reasoning. And in this minimal sense, at least, each member of a civil society will be asked to think from the standpoint of others. This avenue of moral improvement, then, seems to be open to all.

In sum, Kant’s sketch of public participation is, admittedly, one in which only a small subset of the population will actually be forced regularly to think from the standpoint of others in the process of devising legislation. Some active members will be forced to think in this way only from time to time (that is, when selecting legislators). Still other passive citizens will never be asked to think from this point of view in devising legislation. We should not discount the extent to which this is a detriment to these individuals—not only are these passive citizens not permitted to participate in the legislative process, they are also prohibited from participating in an institution that gives them an opportunity to practice their ability to think from the standpoint of others. And while these passive citizens still participate in public life in a more everyday sense, such participation allows these citizens to think from the standpoint of others only to a limited extent. Nevertheless, another important venue of public participation—that of public criticism—will be open to all citizens. I explore the importance of this feature of participation next.

34. “Idea for a Universal History,” Ak 8:26.

*Criticism*

Integral to the requirement of publicity is the notion that individuals, in their role as public citizens, should have the freedom to criticize (though not, of course, overthrow) their sovereign and the laws of the republic. Kant's most famous passage on the public use of reason appears in "What Is Enlightenment?"

The public use of one's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men.... By the public use of one's reason I understand the use which a person makes of it as a scholar before the reading public.... Many affairs which are conducted in the interest of the community require a certain mechanism through which some of the members of the community must passively conduct themselves with an artificial unanimity, so that the government may direct them to public ends, or at least prevent them from destroying those ends. Here argument is certainly not allowed—one must obey. But so far as a part of the mechanism regards himself at the same time as a member of the whole community or of a society of world citizens, and thus in the role of a scholar who addresses the public (in the proper sense of the word) through his writings, he certainly can argue without hurting the affairs for which he is part responsible as a passive member.<sup>35</sup>

In their role as public citizens, members of a republican government have not only the right to speak freely about their government, but also, in some sense, a duty to do so. Indeed, Kant makes three crucial claims about freedom of speech and criticism in this passage and others like it. First, Kant clearly thinks that we have a natural tendency to want to communicate our thoughts with others. Second, he thinks that the right to communicate and criticize on matters of public importance should be protected. And finally, there is a sense in which citi-

35. Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *On History*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001), Ak 8:37.



zens in a republican government have a duty to communicate and criticize, since this is the best—if not only—way of making the will of all known.

The “natural calling” that we have to communicate our thoughts with one another is something that Kant discusses frequently in the *Lectures on Logic*, but it also appears in other discussions of free speech and criticism, for example in “Theory and Practice.” There, Kant asserts that “it is a natural calling of humanity to communicate with one another, especially in what concerns people generally.”<sup>36</sup> And in the Blomberg logic lectures, Kant observes: “Men have a natural inclination to communicate to others the judgments that their understanding has made, and merely from this arises the writing of books, whose cause has otherwise been set down to vanity, to ambition, by other critics of the human race, who would happily interpret everything most unfavorably.”<sup>37</sup> Here, it is noteworthy that freedom of speech is portrayed not just as a right that should be protected, but also as something that improves the way we *think*. There is, for Kant, a real sense in which isolated reasoning is susceptible to error. Below, in my discussion of what Kant calls “logical egoism,” we will see how this relationship between open communication and thought works.

Second, it is clear that one essential component of a republican constitution is the right of its members to speak freely and criticize. Again, this right to speak freely stems from the requirements of publicity that we have already observed. If we are to legislate according to the will of all, then clearly we need to *know* what the will of all is. And the only way to learn this is through free communication. In the essay “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking,” Kant argues:

36. “On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory but Is of No Use in Practice,” Ak 8:305.

37. *Lectures on Logic*, Ak 24:150

The freedom to think is opposed *first* of all to *civil compulsion*. Of course it is said that the freedom to *speak* or to *write* could be taken from us by a superior power, but the freedom to *think* cannot be. Yet how much and how correctly would we *think* if we did not think as it were in community with others to whom we *communicate* our thoughts, and who *communicate* theirs with us! Thus one can very well say that this external power which wrenches away people's freedom publicly to *communicate* their thoughts also takes from them their freedom to *think*—that single germ remaining to us in the midst of all the burdens of civil life, through which alone we can devise means of overcoming all the evils of our condition.<sup>38</sup>

Kant's suggestion in this passage, then, is that the act of communication—whether it is in the form of speech or writing—is a necessary condition of the ability to think freely and correctly. Such communication must, therefore, be protected.

Finally, there is a sense in which criticism is not just a right in a republican government, but also a kind of duty. As I have already argued, it is clear that for citizens of a republic, it is a duty to legislate from the standpoint of the general will. And, as Kant has already told us, to will an end implies also to will the means to that end.<sup>39</sup> Since open communication is a necessary condition for knowing the content of the general will, it seems such communication can be considered a duty, not just among the few representatives of the people, but among all of the members of the republic. Thus, in the same passage from "Theory and Practice" cited above, Kant asks, "And how else, again, could the government get the knowledge it requires for its own essential purpose than by letting the spirit of freedom, so worthy of respect in its origin and in its effects, express itself?"<sup>40</sup>

38. Immanuel Kant, "What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking," in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. Allen Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Ak 8:144.

39. Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:417–418.

40. "On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory but Is of No Use in Practice," Ak 8:305.

*Publicity, Criticism, and Practical Reason*

Thus far in the discussion of Kant's sketch of a republican constitution, we have seen that Kant thinks that there are two crucial components of political participation. First, there is the requirement that the sovereign and subjects alike think in terms of the general will, or the will of all. Ideally, active citizens in Kant's republic legislate directly, and as legislators, they have a duty to make political decisions that reflect the needs of all citizens. The need to think from the standpoint of others becomes especially apparent when we consider the fact that relatively few members of the Kantian republic are actually active citizens—that is, voting participants in the government. Given this kind of silent majority, it becomes crucial that those members who can participate do so with the needs of all in mind. Second, we have seen the important role that criticism and freedom of speech and the pen play in such a constitution. Though there are instances in which a subject must simply obey, a large part of public participation involves making the needs of the public known via open communication and criticism.

In this section, then, we will draw the connection between these important activities in the political sphere and the benefit they have for the accomplishment of the highest good. At first glance, this might seem like a strange claim, since from the beginning we have seen that the doctrine of right, for Kant, involves only the external use of freedom. However, I argue that, while political participation is concerned with the external use of freedom, the *requirements* of political participation—specifically publicity and open criticism—improve our skills of moral reasoning. Specifically, these requirements of political participation help agents develop certain “virtues of practical reasoning.” These virtues of practical reasoning, in turn, allow for improvement not just in the external relations of free agents, but in the internal use of freedom as well.

What, then, are these “virtues of practical reasoning?” Perhaps the most straightforward way to describe these virtues is to look at their opposites, the vices of reason that Kant describes in the *Lectures on Logic*. In all instances of reasoning, it is clear that there is, for Kant, one truly dangerous tendency—the tendency toward prejudice. Now, of course, prejudice can take many different forms, and Kant has no small list of some of the forms it can take. So, for example, Kant lists prejudices of excessive trust and mistrust; prejudices stemming from custom; the prejudice of vanity; and a “prejudice of excessive multitude,” where one convinces oneself that the opinion of the majority must be right.<sup>41</sup> For the purposes of this argument, however, I will focus on two of the main prejudices that Kant discusses; indeed, in some respects many of the other prejudices can be encompassed in these two. According to Kant, these prejudices lie at opposite extremes of a spectrum. First, there is the prejudice or tendency toward logical egoism, which Kant defines as “the prejudice of excessive trust placed in oneself.”<sup>42</sup> Kant thinks of this prejudice of logical egoism as “opposed . . . to another prejudice, namely where one builds all his judgments in the reason of others, judges nothing himself, but merely imitates, in that one elevates others above oneself and trusts nothing to oneself.”<sup>43</sup> Following Kant, we might call this second tendency—the tendency to avoid thinking for oneself—the prejudice of imitation.

Of course, we might still wonder how much relevance this discussion of the vices of reason has to *practical* reason. In other words, what we appear to have in the *Lectures on Logic* are recommendations about how to recognize and avoid various pitfalls of speculative reason, but no explicit mention is made there, at least, of practical reason. Here, it is important to keep in mind Kant’s famous claim in the *Groundwork* there “can

41. *Lectures on Logic*, Ak 24:173–175.

42. *Ibid.*, Ak 24:187.

43. *Ibid.*, Ak 24:188.

only be one and the same reason, which must be distinguished merely in its application.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, with respect to the vices of reason that Kant outlines in the logic lectures, the same types of mistakes can easily appear when we put our reason to its practical use. Unsurprisingly, then, there are clear instances of these mistakes within Kant’s writing on moral philosophy. Several of these examples are outlined below.

*The Prejudice of Imitation and Passivity*

The first prejudice of reason that participation in a republican government can help us avoid is the prejudice of imitation. As its name would suggest, this prejudice reveals itself in the tendency to unthinkingly follow precedent or custom. It is also marked by a tendency to reason passively, or to let other people or circumstances make decisions for oneself. In the Jäsche logic lecture, Kant explains:

Imitation has a universal influence on our judgments, for there is a strong ground for holding to be true what others have put forth as true. Hence the prejudice that what the whole world does is right. . . . The inclination *toward passive use of reason*, or *toward the mechanism of reason rather than toward its spontaneity under laws*, can also be called a prejudice of imitation.<sup>45</sup>

What, then, are the instances of this prejudice with respect to the practical use of reason? Clearly, one instance of the prejudice of imitation is the case in which an agent simply follows another’s examples or moral precepts without thinking about them. Obviously, this type of unthinking allegiance would fly in the face of a moral theory so firmly rooted in the importance of free choice and autonomy. And, indeed, Kant has a good deal to say about the dangers of imitation, especially in his discussions of moral education. Recall, for example, Kant’s careful naviga-

44. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:391.

45. *Lectures on Logic*, Ak 24:76.

tion of the use of example in moral education. Kant concludes that example should be used only in certain, limited ways. Specifically, it can be used to show that certain types of action are *possible*, but it should not be presented as something to imitate. Kant argues: "As for the power of examples (good or bad) that can be held up to the propensity for imitation or warning, what others give us can establish no maxim of virtue. For, a maxim of virtue consists precisely in the subjective autonomy of each human being's practical reason and so implies that the law itself, not the conduct of other human beings, must serve as our incentive."<sup>46</sup> Kant's point in this passage is that imitation deprives us not only of our autonomy, but also of any moral motivation to act. Or, perhaps more precisely, it deprives us of moral motivation *because* it deprives us of our autonomy, or our ability to act on a moral law that we give to ourselves.

There is perhaps another, even more explicitly Kantian, sense in which a tendency toward imitation or laziness might cause trouble for practical reason and pure practical reason. This is because a person who suffers from "passive reasoning" might be more apt to allow her inclinations, rather than the moral law, to guide her actions. Here, we need to be careful, however, since even when an agent chooses in favor of inclination, she is still *choosing*. In other words, it won't be enough to say that a sufficiently passive agent simply "allows" inclination to dictate her actions. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a sense in which an agent who suffers from the prejudice of passivity will be more suggestible to a maxim of inclination, and less likely to challenge such a maxim with one based on the principle of morality.

Finally, there is of course the sense, reflected in both of these earlier concerns, that thinking for oneself is the very thing that defines rational autonomy, so it allows us to practice

46. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:479–480.

that very capacity that makes us morally valuable. Of course, one doesn't actually have to be terribly good at thinking for oneself in order to deserve moral consideration. That is, I owe children moral respect even though they haven't learned to do this, and I owe adults respect even when they fail to do this. But, taken as a whole, thinking for oneself is what characterizes us as deserving of moral consideration.

Having sketched the prejudice of imitation and passivity and the trouble it poses for the moral agent, we are now in a position to explore the ways in which participation in a republican government might help guard against this prejudice when it comes to practical reason. One suggestion appears, perhaps unsurprisingly, in "What Is Enlightenment?" Here, Kant suggests that simply being a member of a free state will make it more likely that we will think for ourselves. So, Kant argues,

For any single individual to work himself out of the life under tutelage which has become almost his nature is very difficult. He has come to be very fond of this state, and he is for the present really incapable of making use of his reason, for no one has ever let him try it out. . . . But that the public should enlighten itself is more possible; indeed, if only freedom is granted, enlightenment is almost sure to follow. For there will always be some independent thinkers . . . who, after throwing off the yoke of tutelage from their own shoulders, will disseminate the spirit of the rational appreciation of both their own worth and every man's vocation for thinking for himself.<sup>47</sup>

Kant's claim, then, is that under conditions of freedom, particularly enlightened individuals will encourage a spirit of free and independent thought among the other members of a society. Of course, on the face of things, Kant's argument here seems almost problematic in the context of a discussion about imitation. But Kant's claim is not that members of a community ought to unthinkingly imitate these particularly enlightened

47. "What Is Enlightenment?" Ak 8:36.

individuals. Rather, his claim here is similar to his argument about the use of example in education. In an open society, there will be members who demonstrate to the rest that thinking for oneself is, in fact, possible. And, furthermore, the knowledge that one is a legislator for himself and others in the political sphere probably enforces his role as autonomous lawgiver in the moral sphere. If there is any doubt that he is capable of giving laws to himself in the latter, the fact that he does (or is, at least, asked to) in the former should serve as an indication of his capabilities.

In addition, as we saw above, citizens in a republican government actually have a duty to engage each other and the sovereign critically. Unlike subjects of a despot, who must accept a law as it is handed down to them, republican citizens are themselves, in some sense, the origin of the law. Their needs (understood collectively, not particularly) guide legislation, and it is from their decision based on the public will that the law derives its validity. All of this suggests that, ideally at least, republican citizens will not be allowed to simply reason by imitation, but will have to creatively and critically devise new laws for the whole. This, I argue, is just an instance of “thinking for oneself” on a more public scale.

Of course, we know all too well that individuals suffer from the prejudices of reason when it comes to political participation, too. My claim is not, then, that political participation *per se* has the effect of ridding us of our prejudices of reason. Rather, my claim is just that, practiced ideally at least, the requirements of political participation are especially useful in correcting our errors of thought elsewhere. Now, one might object that this sketches a rather circuitous route, since one could just as easily say that, practiced ideally, the skills involved in *moral* reasoning are useful in correcting errors of reason. But there is a key difference between the two cases. Political participation, in Kant’s sense, is open and public, and the skills of the partic-



ipants are thus a matter of public examination and judgment. It is precisely because Kant's political philosophy is concerned with the external uses of freedom that it is in this sense a natural training ground for moral reasoning.

### *Logical Egoism*

Opposed to the prejudice of passivity, or reasoning by imitation, is the prejudice or tendency that Kant calls "logical egoism." Unlike the passive reasoner, who cannot come to a conclusion without consulting, and indeed emulating, others' conclusions, the logical egoist has no use whatsoever for the judgments of others. Thus, Kant explains, "Logical egoism is either *indifference* toward the judgments of others, in that I hold the judgments of others to be unnecessary for passing on my own judgment, or it is conceit and arrogance, where one allots it to himself alone to make a correct judgment about a thing for all others."<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere, Kant explains that "this so-called logical egoism consists, then, in nothing but the presumed but often false self-sufficiency of our understanding, existing for itself and, so to say, isolated, where one believes he knows enough by itself and believes he is infallibly correct and incorrigible in all his judgments. And we easily see that this conceited mode of thought is not only completely ridiculous but is even most contrary to real humanity."<sup>49</sup> The logical egoist, then, is someone who doesn't see any need for comparing his judgments with others in order to gauge the accuracy of those judgments. At first, perhaps, Kant's insistence that we *do* in fact seek to compare our judgments with others and his claim that we *ought* to compare judgments in this way might seem to run counter to some of his more well-known claims about reason and judgment, such as the claim that pure practical reason gives a law to *itself*. In order

48. *Lectures on Logic*, Ak 24:874.

49. *Ibid.*, Ak 24:151.

to avoid confusion over this point, it is important to point out that Kant is not claiming that other people's opinions are actually constitutive of the truth. Rather, Kant's claims about consulting others seem to have more to do with applying the moral law and "double-checking" that one has not gone astray in one's reasoning. With respect to practical reason, at least, there seem to be two senses in which this can happen. First, consulting others plays a crucial role in discerning the ends and needs of others. Thus, we might know, through reason alone, that one ought to respect the ends of others so far as those ends are, themselves, consistent with others' ends. But, in order to put such knowledge into practice, we need to know what others' ends actually are. Second, consultation with others will serve as a kind of check on our reasoning. We might, for example, have a preliminary idea of a maxim that we think we can implement, given the constraints of the moral law. But if we make our maxim public, we might find that it is not acceptable, perhaps because it is not consistent with a previously unknown end, or perhaps just because of some mistake in our own reasoning. In any case, Kant's claim that the judgments of others do and ought to serve as a touchstone is a claim about application, rather than justification. Indeed, were it a claim about justification, it would be guilty of collapsing into the prejudice of imitation.

What, then, does the prejudice of logical egoism look like with respect to practical reason? Kant gives us a clue, perhaps, with his description of the prejudice in the passages above. In both passages, Kant describes logical egoism as a kind of "conceit" or "conceited mode of thought." In fact, this language is familiar to Kant's moral philosophy. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant describes self-conceit as the tendency to treat one's own desires and inclinations as sufficient reasons for *others* to act. Self-love, on the other hand, is the milder tendency to think of one's desires and inclinations as giving reasons to *oneself*. In other words, while self-love might cause us to mis-

takenly act on a maxim of self-love, self-conceit causes us to think that our inclinations provide the basis of a rule that everyone else should act upon. This description of the tendency of self-conceit seems clearly to line up with Kant's description of logical egoism in the logic lectures. In both cases, the agent thinks of the judgments of others as superfluous and, indeed, thinks of her own reasons and desires as universally law-giving. Fortunately, however, the activities involved in public participation help temper this tendency to logical egoism and self-conceit. In particular, the requirements of publicity that a republican government places upon (at least) its participating members forces those citizens to compare their judgments against the judgments of others, and so to think from the standpoint of others.

In the first place, a republican constitution ensures the satisfaction of a necessary condition in overcoming logical egoism; namely, it ensures that individuals are able to communicate freely and criticize. It is clear that if agents are to overcome the problem of logical egoism, they will need to communicate freely and openly about relevant matters, for example, what their ends are and how others' actions affect those ends. As we have already seen, Kant thinks that we have a natural tendency to communicate in this way already. He says, for example, that we have a "natural drive, a vocation to communicate [our] cognition to others."<sup>50</sup> So, if an individual is forced to live under a regime where such communication is made difficult or impossible, this natural method of improving practical reason is no longer open to an agent.

Because of the importance of communication when it comes to reason, Kant goes on to argue that free communication and criticism is, in fact, a right that rational agents have. Thus, in the Vienna logic, Kant asserts:

50. *Ibid.*, Ak 24:874.

It is wrong . . . for the state to forbid men to write books and to judge, e.g., about matters of religion. For then they are deprived of the only means that nature has given them, namely, testing their judgment on the reason of others. The freedom to think in silence is given by the people who tyrannize so despotically. But that is only because they cannot prevent anyone from doing it. I can always think what I will. But as for what concerns logical egoism, it has to be conceded that since human nature depends on using this external *criterium*, I also have a right to expound my thoughts publicly.<sup>51</sup>

Because communication is so critical to thought—in this case, because it is critical to avoiding logical egoism—we cannot be barred from making use of our capacity to communicate and compare. Any form of government that unnecessarily restricted such activity would be standing in the way of reason's progress, including its progress in the practical sense. And to do so would be to limit virtue's progress. A republican constitution, then, with its emphasis on freedom of speech, provides one of the necessary conditions for such progress.

However, there is an even more pointed way that participation in a republican government helps us overcome the prejudice of logical egoism and become better practical reasoners, and this has to do with the duty of publicity and patriotism that citizens of a republican government have. Such a duty encourages, and perhaps even forces, citizens to think from the standpoint of others, and thus overcome the dangers of logical egoism. Recall from the earlier section on publicity that in an ideal republican government, active citizens have a duty to think from the general will when devising and abiding by legislation. I also pointed out that with respect to the ideal of publicity, there are many similarities between Kant's moral philosophy and his political philosophy. The notion of consent, for example, is prevalent in both. But there is, of course, an important difference between the kinds of consent required in each

51. Ibid., Ak 24:874–875.

case. Participation in civil society forces consent out into the open, so to speak, so that agents can no longer make do simply with hypothetical consent, or thinking as if their maxims were a matter of public scrutiny. For this reason, in particular, political participation has a positive effect on our ability to think from the standpoint of others, and thus, to overcome the prejudices of logical egoism and self-conceit. Citizens with a duty to think from the general will when it comes to legislating will, in effect, practice the very skill of practical reasoning central to making virtuous decisions.

It should by now be fairly clear how participation in a republican government brings a community of agents closer to the highest good. By participating in government and legislating so that the public will is reflected in the laws, agents are able to practice their skills of practical reason, overcome various prejudices of reason, and become, on the whole, more virtuous. Nevertheless, there remains a worry. Though Kant places this emphasis on publicity, he by no means thinks that every member of a republic ought to be an active participating member. All women are excluded from participation (that is, devising legislation and choosing legislators), as are unpropertied men, that is, men who depend on others for their livelihood. These passive citizens are still asked to adopt a "patriotic" way of thinking, to be sure, and their everyday actions in public life may help them to think from the standpoint of others. But by excluding these individuals from public participation, Kant is also excluding them from an important opportunity to develop their practical reason. Though, of course, practical reason should be able to develop in the course of normal experience, it is nevertheless the case that depriving so many of the opportunity to hone their skills only stands in the way of moral progress.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS



THE STATED GOAL of the discussion in this book was to show that Kant's moral philosophy makes room for, and indeed requires, a social element in a way not typically acknowledged by his critics. We have seen that this is true in at least two senses. First, the goal of Kant's moral system is, itself, a kind of ethical community. Second, the means of working toward this community are themselves social. In the preceding chapters, we have seen how three social institutions and activities in particular play important roles in helping us come closer to the goal of an ethical community. Indeed, because Kant tells us that we have a *duty* to strive toward the highest good, and because these institutions are uniquely able to improve important moral capacities, I have argued that we actually have a duty to participate in these kinds of relationships and institutions.

In these concluding remarks, however, I would like to take a step back, as it were, and focus on three more general ways that Kant's moral philosophy should be considered to be fundamentally concerned with the "social." That is, while the preceding chapters have given us a sense of how specific relationships have an influence on an agent's moral development, the arguments I have presented also give us a sense of the community-centered commitments at the core of Kant's moral philosophy. In the remarks that follow, I will argue that there are at least three senses in which this is true. First, and perhaps most centrally, Kant's moral philosophy is actually one in which the *justification* for moral action is importantly social. This might seem like a strange claim, since the most familiar accounts of Kantian justification are, of course, the isolated categorical imperative

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procedures that he presents in the *Groundwork*. But even there, within the formula of the kingdom of ends, we can begin to see how a concern for one's moral community is actually an important part of the justification, or ground, of moral action for Kant.

Second, Kant's moral theory and his anthropological claims work together to demonstrate that many of the capacities that otherwise seem to be only "under our control" or only "up to us" are actually influenced to a large degree by the social relationships we engage in and commit ourselves to. Furthermore, as I have emphasized throughout, the fact that Kant tells us that we have a duty to pursue a kind of ethical community suggests that these facts about the social influence upon our capacities of reason and sympathy are not simply interesting features of his theory. Rather, Kant's claim that we have this duty means that we have an obligation to pursue certain kinds of relationships, such as the ones presented in the preceding chapters, that can help us more effectively accomplish this end.

Finally, the interpretation of Kant's theory that I have presented here tells us something about the way we ought to view others in our moral community. Specifically, it is not enough that we simply afford them the respect that they are due as moral agents. Rather, it suggests that we ought to view them, to the extent possible, as cooperating members of a kind of joint venture whose aim is the accomplishment of the highest good. It also suggests that we ought to broaden our scope when we think about the boundaries of the ethical community since, for example, future generations will probably be just as essential to bringing about this kind of progress over the course of history as will those individuals who currently inhabit our moral community. And finally, it suggests that whatever faith we may have reserved for God and grace on the "transcendent account" should instead be converted into a kind of faith in one another as we strive to accomplish the highest good.

*A Social Justification for Moral Action*

In the preceding chapters, I have presented Kant's concept of the highest good and argued that the most mature and acceptable version of this idea is the one he presents primarily in his later works, especially in the *Religion*. In this view, the highest good is a state of affairs that is to be achieved on earth, and not in an afterlife. It is also a state of affairs that is shared by the community. Rather than enjoying happiness in direct proportion to their virtue, individuals in a realm of ends or ethical community instead live in a society in which happiness is, in general, as pervasive as is compatible with maximal virtue. God, as the author of laws of nature, ensures this not by distributing happiness directly, but by constructing the laws of nature in such a way that virtue causes happiness, at least as a rule. In other words, the relationship between virtue and happiness is a systematic relationship in which to be virtuous is to respect other people's abilities to set ends for themselves and, thus, to ensure that these ends are, generally, fulfilled. In this section, I will examine the extent to which this makes Kant's moral philosophy importantly "social." I sketch two senses in which a moral system might be called "social," and I argue that there is reason to think of Kant's moral philosophy as social on both levels.

The first sense in which a moral system might be said to be importantly social, then, is in the accomplishment of its goals. That is to say, one might argue that the ends required by a given system are best accomplished or only accomplished when people work together as a group. Clearly, such an interpretation assumes several things—first, and most patently, it assumes that there is some end that the moral system is working toward, or, in other words, that the moral system in question is teleological. Second, it assumes that there is some social component to the achievement of these ends. Now, of course, these two components need not exist together. One might, for example, have a



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teleological theory that contained no social component; a perfectionist theory might fit this description, for example. But insofar as a theory is teleological and assumes that there is a shared good or end to be pursued, there will be this social component to a moral system.

The clearest example of such a social role within a teleological theory is, of course, utilitarianism. Whether one is an act- or rule-utilitarian, a direct or indirect utilitarian, one fundamental fact remains stable, and that is that there is a good—happiness—that ought to be maximized. This process is social because bringing about the greatest happiness is a shared end—I may have to sacrifice some small happiness for the sake of the greater good. Indeed, this observation about utilitarianism was what led John Rawls to suggest that utilitarianism is unable to distinguish among people.<sup>1</sup> Though utilitarian subjects are fundamentally equal, they have no claims on each other. Theirs is a theory in service of happiness.

Typically, Kant's moral philosophy has been described as fundamentally non-consequentialist. And though this is true in the sense that Kant puts the right before the good, what I hope the above discussion has made clear is that, at the very least, Kant's moral philosophy is also one that has an end that requires social cooperation. As his theory of the highest good demonstrates, Kant thinks that we cannot help but think of morality in teleological terms; the object of our moral action is as necessary a part of the story as is the more well known ground. Of course, this gets us only halfway to the assertion that Kant's moral philosophy is social in the accomplishment of its ends. For this to be true, one would also need to argue that these ends are social. If we were to look only at Kant's earlier accounts of the highest good, in which this object is described

1. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 23: "The striking feature of the utilitarian view of justice is that it does not matter, except indirectly, how this sum of satisfactions is distributed among individuals."

as being achieved on an individual basis, it would certainly be difficult to justify the claim that Kant's moral philosophy is social in anything more than the rather trivial sense in which individual agents pursue their own virtue alongside other agents. In that case, Kant's theory *would* almost seem like a theory concerned with individual moral perfection.

But, as I have argued, Kant abandons the account of the highest good as a state of affairs that is transcendent and individually accomplished and moves instead toward an account of the highest good in which the object of moral action is a kind of ethical community, or realm of ends, achievable on this earth, as a shared goal. With this account in place, we have then the second component to the description above: not only is Kant's moral philosophy importantly social in the ends that it pursues, it is also one that asks us to work toward this goal as a community. And with both of these components in place, it becomes clear that Kant's moral philosophy is importantly social in *at least* these two senses.

Still, this type of interpretation leaves open the possibility that the justification for the moral law is still an individualistic one. That is, even though we might strive for a kind of ethical community in the course of human history, our reason for pursuing this end might still come from a procedure that is done in isolation, with little or no reference to a wider community. This, as we saw in the introduction, is part of the criticism of Kant's alleged individualism—that the categorical imperative and fact of reason are simply formulae for determining right action, and that there is little or no social component to these formulae. Thus, we might think that, though a certain interpretation of the highest good does some good in showing that Kant's moral theory is importantly social, it nevertheless cannot erase the fact that, at its most fundamental level—at the level of justification—it is an individualistic one.

However, this criticism can also be countered by appeal to

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Kant's more mature account of the highest good, specifically the sense in which the ground of action and the object of the highest good are systematically related. Without this account, the answer to the question "why act from the law of duty?" would be simply because the formal principle of morality tells us to do so. But with this account of the highest good at hand, it becomes apparent that this answer, though not incorrect, is nevertheless incomplete. We might revise the answer, then, and say that our reason for acting morally is always in the *first place* that the formal principle of morality tells us to do so, but that included in this very principle is the idea of the highest good, understood as a kind of ethical community. In other words, the idea of respecting people's ends insofar as that is consistent with the moral law is included in the formal principle of morality from the outset. If we understand the highest good in what I argue is its most convincing formulation, then part of what is contained in the formal principles of morality just is an ethical community or realm of ends. This kind of interpretation is hinted at when Kant explains in the *Groundwork* that the three formulations of the categorical imperative are "at bottom only so many formulae of the very same law."<sup>2</sup> And it is most clearly stated in the second *Critique*:

It is, however, evident that if the moral law is already included as supreme condition in the concept of the highest good, the highest good is then not merely the object: the concept of it and the representation of its existence as possible by our practical reason are *at the same time the determining ground of the pure will* because in that case the moral law, already included and thought in this concept, and no other object, in fact determines the will in accordance with autonomy. This order of concepts of the determination of the will must not be lost sight of, since otherwise we misunderstand ourselves and believe that we are contradicting ourselves even where everything stands together in the most perfect harmony.<sup>3</sup>

2. Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 4:436–437.

3. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:109–110, my emphasis.

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Thus, though the object of morality cannot precede the ground of moral action, the two are so closely intertwined that we might say that they “occur simultaneously” in a certain sense. To adopt the maxims required by the formula of universal law or the formula of humanity is *just to* work toward a kind of ethical community. By way of emphasis, recall Kant’s response to Winzemann’s objection about the highest good being a “mere wish.” When we think of the ground and object as being closely intertwined, we can see another reason for Kant’s insistence that the object of the highest good is more than just a wish: to act morally is *already* to bring about the highest good. All of this, in turn, has major implications for how we think of moral justification in Kant’s philosophy. If we think of the ground and object as closely intertwined, and if we further think of the object as a kind of ethical community that can be achieved over the course of human history, then moral justification becomes a largely social project.

### *A Social Influence upon the Development of Our Moral Capacities*

As we saw in chapter 2, it is typically thought that Kant presents a theory of moral agency and action that is fundamentally individualistic. And in comparison with other theories, perhaps, there is some reason to view Kant this way. After all, Kant does not think that the opinions of others are constitutive of moral truth, and he emphasizes an account of agency and motivation that places a great deal of emphasis on an agent’s ability to be motivated by the recognition of duty itself. This, after all, is Kant’s reason for being cautious about the use of example in moral education. To allow or encourage a pupil to think of another person’s actions as a separate moral standard, or to allow that pupil to be motivated by a comparison of herself with others, would run contrary to Kant’s fundamental commitments

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regarding the common-sense nature of the moral law, and pure practical reason's ability to come to the right moral conclusions and be motivated by those moral conclusions. But while these claims are, indeed, central to a correct understanding of Kant's moral philosophy, we have also seen that there are important respects in which our interactions with others can have an effect on the way we reason morally and are motivated morally.

To be clear, the observation that moral reason is influenced, and perhaps even partially constructed, by our relationships with others is not an idea that is new to my argument. This is the idea that, for example, Philip Rossi has in mind when he argues that "we would not be far off the mark in taking Kant to understand critique as the very process by which reason (freely) brings itself to be exercised socially—and to understand autonomy as the freedom by which reason acknowledges and takes upon itself the task of being governed socially."<sup>4</sup> And there are clear foundational reasons why this should be true of Kant's conception of reason. First, the requirements of Kant's moral theory make moral reasoning a social endeavor in a nontrivial sense. Since much of what morality asks of us is to bring our ends into harmony and consistency with others' ends, moral agency is centrally concerned with communicating with others, discerning their ends, and finding a way to make these ends mutually consistent. Moral reasoning, as Onora O'Neill puts it, is as much a communicative activity as it is a use of our natural powers of reasoning.<sup>5</sup> The observations made in chapter 5 of this book—about the importance of public participation in the political sphere, and the importance of thinking from the standpoint of others—serve, I hope, to drive this point home.

But Kantian moral reasoning must also be social for a second, crucial reason. Specifically, Kant is realistic about our own

4. Rossi, *The Social Authority of Reason*, 46–47.

5. O'Neill, "The Public Use of Reason."

epistemological limitations and shortcomings when it comes to assessing mistakes in our moral reasoning. These mistakes might manifest themselves in various ways—perhaps as the tendency to overrate oneself morally, or perhaps in the form of various implicit biases that cause us to miss important moral cues. For this reason, it is crucial that we provide agents with a moral education that, as far as is possible, guards against such mistakes. And, perhaps more importantly, these facts about our obscurity to ourselves show us how crucial it is to pursue relationships of trust and openness in which we can hope to learn about our shortcomings in moral reasoning in a context of love and respect. This, as I have argued above, is reason for thinking that friendship is not a peripheral idea for Kant, but rather a relationship whose benefits extend to the very foundations of our capacity for moral reasoning and moral self-assessment.

### *The Moral Community and Faith in Others*

Finally, I hope that the argument in the preceding chapters shows that we should reframe some of the ways that we think of the members of our moral community. This is the case in at least two different senses. First, the observations presented in this book—especially those about moral progress taking place over the course of history—suggest that we think of our moral community as including people whom we might not have otherwise included, namely those belonging to future generations. And second, I suggest that the argument presented in this book shows us that whatever faith we may have initially had in God to provide the happiness that accords with moral virtue should, instead, be turned into faith in the other members of our moral community. Nor is this faith an empty one; rather, it is one that each of us has some degree of influence and efficacy in, since we can participate in relationships that make moral action on the part of others more likely.

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Of course, it is perhaps a bit odd to say, within an account of Kantian ethics, that we have some kind of obligation to future generations. And, to be sure, if we do in fact have any kind of obligation to these future generations on the Kantian account, it will not be identical to the kinds of obligations that we have toward agents who are currently setting and pursuing ends. Nevertheless, a few features of the argument presented here serve to suggest that a Kantian agent may, in fact, have certain limited obligations to future generations. Or, if the language of obligation is too strong, we might say that the possibility of agents existing in the future gives Kantian agents moral reasons to act in certain ways. To spell out my argument precisely, the reasoning is as follows: recall that, on the account of Kant's highest good that I have argued for, Kant tells us that we have an obligation to pursue the highest good, understood as a kind of ethical community. We have this obligation, regardless of the unfortunate fact that it is exceedingly unlikely that any of us will ever come to see its realization. Kant is sometimes realistic, perhaps even sometimes pessimistic, about humans' moral failings, and if this goal is ever to be realized, it will have to be over the course of many generations. But this fact does not ease the strength of the obligations that we have to pursue this end. Among those obligations, I have argued, are obligations to pursue and promote various institutions that aid in the moral development of agents. But of course, given the observation that progress can occur only over the course of many generations, we can see that we might have some type of obligation toward agents who do not yet exist. To be sure, we will likely have more efficacy when it comes to promoting various institutions in our currently existing community. But when it comes, for example, to deciding how to devote a society's resources, I think we can legitimately say that future generations' aim of working toward the highest good should provide a reason (though perhaps not always a decisive reason) for us to act in certain ways.

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Finally, the arguments presented in this book show us that there is a very crucial sense in which Kant's moral philosophy asks its agents to have a kind of faith in one another. The "transcendent," individual interpretation, as I argued in chapter 1, asks us to have a great deal of faith. It asks agents to have a rational faith in the existence of an afterlife in which they might achieve perfect virtue and have this virtue matched or rewarded with the happiness that corresponds to it. One might think, then, that in rejecting the more "transcendent" interpretation, I also reject the idea that this faith is a central part of Kant's story about moral progress. To the contrary, viewing Kant's account of the highest good as "immanent" and communally shared should not make us think that faith has no place. Rather, it simply changes the *object* of that faith. Of course, we still have faith that God, as the author of the laws of nature, will make happiness correspond with virtue. But rather than having faith in eventual virtue and happiness in an afterlife, we should instead have a kind of faith in other moral agents, that *they* might be able to achieve virtue or moral progress, and thus contribute to the virtue and happiness that is part of our progress toward accomplishing the highest good, or moral community. Perhaps, given our experience with our fellow agents, this is a discomfoting thought. Perhaps we would rather have faith in God and the afterlife than in the agents with whom we share the planet. But there is a certain sense in which faith in other agents is not so disheartening at all, and this, in some sense, is what I have been pointing out throughout this discussion. It is not *simply* faith that we are asked to have in others; rather, we should think of this faith as a kind of faith supported by the very contributions that we ourselves make to the moral community and its institutions.





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