Chapter 4: The Content of Kantian Moral Theory

Hegel accuses Kant’s ethics of yielding only an “empty formalism.”¹ After all, Kantian morality is based on the concept of freedom as instantiated in purely rational beings. Kant himself states that in such beings there are no obligations. But it is surprising that Hegel’s charge was leveled against the whole of Kant’s moral theory, and even more surprising that it continues to stick (if only making infrequent appearances) in contemporary literature on the topic. In order to determine the nature and extent of obligations, Kant requires consideration of the human will as a productive law-giving power. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant states that “in the human being there is a faculty of determining oneself from oneself, independently of necessitation by sensible impulses.” We know that Kant has centered the faculty of the will on a conception of self as a participant in a noumenal community—via our humanity—an end worthy of respect. If we, individually, participate in something worthy of respect, then Kant must provide some explanation for our will generating obligation, rather than wholly necessitating our actions. The prevailing view (in Kant’s time and persisting even today) is that the human will is fundamentally flawed. This doctrine of ‘original sin’ as an inability to have a wholly good will and, moreover, to have a predisposition to evil, is challenged here. For Kant, the view can only be overcome through self-knowledge that yields the appropriate respect for the humanity in ourselves. This requires an understanding of the individual will in a reciprocal relation to the will of other human agents. An understanding of that

predicate of our self-concept brings us fully under the scope of the moral law and allows us to derive duties of action that produce virtuous conduct.

4.1 The Duty of Self-Knowledge

For Kant, the objective necessity of action in accordance with the categorical imperative is a duty. But the categorical imperative’s formulation, while dependent on a conception of a pure will does not presuppose a holy will. A holy will generates maxims that “necessarily harmonize with the laws of autonomy.” This means that a holy will has a power that is wholly effective in itself. The human will lacks that complete power because empirical conditions are not under the complete control of the individual. Kantian morality is therefore ‘empty’ in the sense that beings who are moral (those with a divine or holy will) are subject to no duties, though this is not the target of Hegel’s attack. For a moral being, there is no distinction, and therefore no tension between what ought to be and what is. But Kantian ethics, as a guide for human action, is a “path of general virtue” by which one recognizes the capacity to act not merely in conformity with the moral law but from respect of that law in itself. Kant defines a duty of virtue as an end that is also a duty and is generated purely from free self-constraint. Again, a doctrine of virtue would not be applicable to a holy will because a holy will is immune to any temptation to

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3 *Review of Schulz*, 8:12.
4 *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:117.
violate the moral law, so there is no need to “master one’s inclinations when they rebel against the law.”

According to Kant, a human being’s primary duty is self-knowledge. This duty has two important parts. First, this duty requires a person to acknowledge a duty to himself. This means that he must reconcile an apparent contradiction in his concept of himself. As Kant states “if the I that imposes obligation is taken in the same sense as the I that is put under obligation, a duty to oneself is a self-contradictory concept.” If I am both the obligator and the obligated, I can as well bind myself as I can release myself from that obligation, meaning that no obligation is imposed at all. But we do say that we owe certain things to ourselves, and we believe this to be as sensible as saying that we owe something to, or are owed something by, another. The concept of obligation is understood as relational. Is Kant thereby committed to a dualistic two-worlds view where the human being is divided between corporeal body and an inert soul substance, the latter of which obligates the former? No, and Kant explicitly rejects this idea himself. Instead, Kant is interested in the dual means of perceiving a human being. In the same way that appearances are but one particular representation of the underlying thing in itself one’s own self-concept is initially empirically given. However, a recognition of one’s own productive capacity of thought gives rise to a conception of self as intelligence,

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6 Ibid.
7 *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:417
8 See *Metaphysics of Morals* 6:419. This passage serves as important support for attributing a compatibilist theory to Kant. However, it is not because Kant rejects the idea of a soul as a non-corporeal substance, instead, the reciprocity of obligation required by his moral theory would require a substance distinct from the body to be subject to obligations reciprocally imposed by an empirical, heteronomous substance, which Kant cannot allow.
hence he has two standpoints from which he can regard himself and cognize laws for the use of his powers and consequently for all his actions: *first*, insofar as he belongs to the world of sense, under laws of nature (heteronomy); *second*, as belonging to the intelligible world, under laws which, being independent of nature, are not empirical but grounded merely in reason.\(^9\)

The freedom of intelligible beings combined with the concept of autonomy is the universal law of morality. But we as humans know upon self-examination that we can, at the same time, be regarded as members of the world of sense. A wholly noumenal being has no conflict between the will to act and the incentive to act. A wholly phenomenal being, by contrast, has instinct and sensory responses as its only source of inclination to act. But we would have no self-respect if we considered ourselves, as beings participating in the natural world, to be merely animalistic. And, as Kant states, to regard ourselves as merely animalistic is to deny our freedom because “the actions of animals are regular; they are performed in accordance with rules which necessitate them *subjectively.*”\(^{10}\) Only objective necessity is compatible with freedom and objective necessity is not to be found except in a law that is derived from the concept of autonomy. Having said that Kant ascribes a deterministic character to nature, his “first principle of duty to oneself” as “the dictum ‘live in conformity with nature’”\(^{11}\) seems contradictory. For, if obligation inheres only in the concept of oneself as a free being, how can the first obligation so derived require us to conform to a deterministic system? Section III of the *Groundwork* deals directly with this apparent contradiction, and we see that the solution lies in the distinction

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\(^9\) *Groundwork*, 4:452.

\(^{10}\) *Lectures on Ethics*, p. 122, emphasis added.

\(^{11}\) *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:419.
between a thing as it appears and the thing in itself. Not only must a human being think of himself as belonging both to the world of sense and to the world of understanding, but he must examine his own will to see what “belongs merely to his desires and inclinations” in order to reject those as the ground of his action and instead claim for himself “actions that can be done only by disregarding all desires and sensible incitements.”

Accordingly, as the discussion of radical evil in preceding chapters has already alluded to, the principal command of duty is:

know (scrutinize, fathom) yourself not in terms of your natural perfection (your fitness or unfitness for all sorts of discretionary or even commanded ends) but rather in terms of your moral perfection in relation to your duty. That is, know your heart.

Kant is identifying a duty to be self-respecting and this has two important components. First, Kant rejects the commonly expressed Christian doctrine of ‘original sin’ by affirming a “noble predisposition to the good” present in humans. The predisposition is discussed more thoroughly in the Religion. In Book One, on ‘radical evil,’ Kant rejects the doctrine of original sin by providing a demonstration of evil as a propensity rather than a predisposition. A propensity is brought about, but not necessitated, whereas a predisposition is necessarily present, though not necessarily acted upon. The human predisposition to the good is “the capacity for respect for the moral law as in itself a sufficient incentive of the will,” upon which “it

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12 *Groundwork*, 4:457.
14 Ibid.
is absolutely impossible to graft anything evil.”¹⁵ Second, it requires an impartial assessment of one’s deeds in accord with the moral law. A recognition of the things one wishes to do but does not carry out will provide the true basis of self-respect instead of “egotistical self-esteem.”¹⁶

This notion of self-respect derived from the concept of self as predisposed to the good may provide a useful segue to a discussion of the teleological nature of Kant’s theory, but that topic cannot be taken up in full detail here. Instead, we can examine a few passages that provide, in my view, enough evidence to warrant my claim that Kant’s arguments from teleology provide substantive content to his moral theory. To feel oneself motivated to act in accordance with the moral law from no basis other than respect for duty in and of itself, free of sensuous impulses, is to discover the sublimity of our supersensible existence and subjectively effects respect for the higher vocation in human beings, who are at the same time conscious of their sensible existence and of the dependence, connected with it, on their pathologically affected nature.¹⁷

That respect for self and motivation from duty “connects him with an order of things…and the whole of all ends.”¹⁸ It makes him aware of “the fundamental rule” of action as “the conformity of free behavior to the essential ends of humanity.”¹⁹

These may be only hints of a teleological theory, but there is no disputing the section of Kant’s Lectures devoted to “the ultimate destiny of the human race.” That ultimate destiny is the “highest possible perfection of human nature—this is the kingdom of

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¹⁶ Ibid.
¹⁷ Critique of Practical Reason, 5:88.
¹⁸ Critique of Practical Reason, 5:87.
¹⁹ Lectures on Ethics, p. 122.
And this ultimate end is made possible through the effort and guidance of human conscience, an intellectual and moral “predisposition” each human being is endowed with. Our conscience gives us a subjective idea of God as supreme adjudicator and of ourselves as “accountable to God” for all of our deeds. This idea, of God as effecting the moral law in humans means that humanity has essential ends. Thus, we can consider Kant’s claim to be, roughly, that Nature (the whole of the phenomenal and noumenal realms) was created such that humans, with their dual membership, can harmonize ends to bring about a moral order of finite beings: a kingdom of virtue. This commitment underlies the derivation of all Kantian moral duties.

4.2 The Kantian Notion of ‘Virtue’

Kant begins the first section of the *Groundwork* with the statement that a good will constitutes “the indispensable condition even of worthiness to be happy.” That claim contains a direct refutation of the three ‘ancient dicta’ Kant presents later in the *Metaphysics of Morals*:

i. There is only one virtue and one vice.

ii. Virtue is the observance of the middle way between opposing vices.

iii. Virtue (like prudence) must be learned from experience.

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22 Ibid.
23 *Groundwork*, 4:393.
Of course, the most controversial claim, serving as common foundation of each of the three dicta is the concept of individual happiness as the highest good. Kant does not agree that happiness is the end that each moral agent should be striving for or be motivated by. Instead, ‘worthiness to be happy’ is Kant’s summum bonum.²⁵ It may be the case that the ‘highest good’ would be ‘worthiness’ and ‘happiness’ together. However, Kant clearly states in several works that happiness is due only to God’s grace. Eligibility for that grace (to put it bluntly) requires that one be worthy of happiness. Therefore, worthiness may indeed be a sufficient condition for happiness, but Kant cannot be certain of that. He is certain however, that it is a necessary condition and therefore it can only be worthiness itself and not the conjunction of the two, that we hold as the highest good to which we should strive. But to directly confront the eudaemonistic principle, he must first dispense with the means presented by ‘the ancients’ according to which one obtains happiness.

In dispensing with the first dictum, Kant asserts that virtue is the indispensable condition he is discussing. It is a strength of will, not a particular action. Moreover, it is a strength specific to the human condition because virtue admits of a conflict between the moral law and the contingent inclinations. If virtue were a particular act, then a divine will would act in such a way. However, we lack the ability to bring about the moral law purely. Our will instead, generates obligations for us. Virtue is our ability to do as we will because we respect the duty. Therefore, a proper moral theory does not simply seek to identify correct actions in

²⁵ See Lectures, p. 122.
particular circumstances (a situational ethics) but instead seeks to find a basis for action that holds regardless of circumstances such that one doesn’t choose a virtuous action but instead acts from a virtuous disposition.

In regard to the second dictum, Kant finds Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean entirely unsatisfying. Aristotle, again motivated by a quest for human happiness, locates that end as the simple act of contemplative wisdom. But if one cannot achieve that and must instead perform mundane actions, then happiness can be found in striving for the centerpoint between competing vices. For Kant, a purely contemplative life is not sufficient to be worthy of happiness unless and until the whole empirical realm is ordered such that all rational beings can simultaneously lead contemplative lives. But that other-regarding notion of virtuous activity will be taken up a bit later. For now, we can look to Kant’s example of thrift as an illustration of the difficulties he found in the application of Aristotle’s view.\(^{26}\) The first difficulty is deciphering the way in which one determines a degree of vice. If there is a degree of spending that constitutes miserliness and a degree that is wasteful, what is the determining capacity or principle? Second, how can competing vices be thought of as coming together at all (assuming that it is intelligible to think of vices as ends of a ‘spectrum of choice’)? If miserliness and wastefulness each contain a common element, thriftiness, how is it that one is to determine when they’ve exited the realm of vice and stumbled onto the virtuous conduct? Both points are species of the same criticism, namely that Aristotle while acknowledging a need for a principle of action

\(^{26}\) Metaphysics of Morals, n. 6:404.
has failed to formulate it in a way that actually indicates virtuous actions and flags other actions as inconsistent with virtue. So, a good will is not one that merely navigates along a spectrum of competing, contingent options but is instead itself a disposition to formulate meaningful and action-guiding principles. Likewise, one instance of ‘getting it right’ does not guarantee happiness, but, for Kant, happiness could be due to him who wills correctly absent any particular action. Therefore, a good will is not accidental, but is a disposition.

Lastly, Kant rejects the notion that virtue is gained through experience. As was just stated, virtue as disposition makes the commission of particular acts secondary with regard to moral assessment. It is not a habit of acting in a particular way that makes one virtuous. However, we will see later that habituation in right action can achieve two outcomes. First, it can make actions from duty easier in that one becomes accustomed to resisting outside influences and can therefore perform the actions joyfully. Second, habituation can help to awaken a sense of duty, as Kant describes the education of children, but it can never make someone adopt a particular end as his own. So experience, while helpful, can never be the source of virtue, only a helpful accessory. Nor can our experience of pleasure and pain serve as a reliable guide to virtue. Kant uses prudence to illustrate his point. Prudence may guide us as a principle of action, but only in an advisory capacity. Prudence tells us what we might do if we wish a particular outcome and it might even prescribe maxims quite

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27 This is not to say that someone who does nothing can be virtuous, instead it is meant to show it is the act of willing that matters most. If the empirical conditions prevent action, that is a matter of circumstance, not of moral failing. But, as will be discussed later, proper willing does require one to pursue conditions that allow for action in accord with what duty requires.

28 See Critique of Practical Reason, 5:156 for more on this.
generally. But because it is entirely founded on contingent judgments, it cannot serve as the basis of a practical law. Again, human happiness as an end of action is rejected. If happiness were an object to be achieved through action, both the rule and the object would be based on the feeling of happiness that one has or wishes to have, so it refers to and is based upon experience, and then the variety of judgment must be endless. This principle, therefore, does not prescribe the very same practical rules to all rational beings, even though the rules come under a common heading.29

Therefore prudence, as experience-based, may provide guidance in particular instances, but it does not do anything to effect the very disposition by which judgments are made. It may provide a reliable gauge of action such that one appears virtuous, but it does not insure that deeds were done from respect for the moral law, only from a self-directed desire to get things ‘right.’ In other words, prudence is a skill of choosing “means to one’s own happiness…means to another purpose,”30 but not choice of an action that is commanded absolutely. By contrast, a ‘worthiness to be happy’ when taken as the object to be achieved through action, generates a law of the will based on a concept that holds universally for all rational agents. Thus, the principle doesn’t merely advise, but commands; and a command is instructive regardless of experience. Virtue then, for Kant, cannot be derived from—or commanded by—experience. It is instead, the refinement of the will that comes from a person setting before himself the proper object of action (his humanity) and acting from the respect of that object.

29 Critique of Practical Reason, 5:36.
30 Groundwork, 4.416.
Because the project of the *Groundwork* is to identify the “supreme principle of morality,” Kant must present the idea instantiated in such a principle and consider that idea’s actuality. The idea, as discussed in Chapter 2, is the idea of freedom. However, the idea of freedom as wholly unconditioned is not comprehensible by human reason. But the idea of a causality beyond the world of sense, yet still determined by a formal condition is intelligible. This causality, as autonomy, yields a practically necessary concept of virtue. Virtue is the concept of a moral disposition (an ideal of pure practical reason) “in conflict.” It is in conflict because it is at the same time subject to the moral law within itself (as an obligation) and the impulses of nature that serve as obstacles to acting in accordance with obligation. Virtue is the capacity to determine that one “can do what the law tells him unconditionally that he ought to do.” To be virtuous, then, requires a commitment to the goodness of man. And because virtue is the only disposition that can, according to Kant, make a person worthy of happiness, those who desire happiness must acknowledge their own goodness, respect it, and act accordingly.

Here again is evidence of Kant’s departure from traditional ethical theories, particularly those grounded in (or identified with) certain religious traditions. For a common theme in many theories criticized directly or indirectly by Kant is that of man as deficient, prone to vice, or downright sinful. It is as if those moral theories regarded man’s life as a race, with Heaven (or some variation thereof) as the distant

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31 *Groundwork*, 4:392.
32 *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:45.
finish line and man expected to run with a broken leg, two left shoes, and some little
devil icing the track. The idea is that man is ill-suited to the task, comes out of the
gate defective, and is perpetually falling victim to sinister forces beyond his control.
In such a case, he seems destined to either head for the stands or to sabotage any
competitors in an attempt to secure a win by default. This is the “fanatical
contempt...for the whole human race”\textsuperscript{34} that Kant rejects. Kant’s moral theory,
absent the premise of deficiency, does not take as its purpose either a eudaimonistic
goal of self-promotion to the extent allowed without harm to others, nor a thoroughly
altruistic promotion of others’ purposes to the exclusion of one’s own. This is why
Kant’s moral theory is thoroughly non-consequentialist, the \textit{object of action} which is
not defective in itself is the basis of value.

The Kantian commitment to the inherent goodness of man can be seen clearly
in a passage from the Introduction to the \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}:

human choice, however, is a choice that can indeed be \textit{affected} but not
\textit{determined} by impulses, and is therefore of itself (apart from an acquired
proficiency of reason) not pure but can still be determined to actions by pure
will. \textit{Freedom} of choice is this independence from being \textit{determined} by
sensible impulses; this is the negative concept of freedom.\textsuperscript{35}

In this way, man is granted a fundamental capacity of choice which is then subjected
to sensuous impulses but is not \textit{in itself} the originator nor the powerless recipient of
those impulses. This is in direct contrast with those theories that identify choice and
desire as having the same origin. For Kant, the human will is the source of human
dignity and there could be no dignity granted to something that generates sensuous

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}, 6:441.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}, 6:214.
impulses. Without embarking on a complete analysis of the concept of evil in
Kantian morality, it should suffice here to point out that an evil man is not a man who
has unsuccessfully ‘tamed his passions’ as theories holding the will as responsible for
those passions might also say. Kant’s discussion of man’s predisposition to good,
rather than evil, in the Religion is a return to the notion of imputability. Kant says,

Man himself must make or have made himself into whatever, in a moral sense,
whether good or evil, he is or is to become. Either condition must be an effect
of his free choice; for otherwise he could not be held responsible for it and
could therefore be morally neither good nor evil. When it is said, Man is
created good, this can mean nothing more than: He is created for good and the
original predisposition in man is good; not that, thereby, he is already actually
good, but rather that he brings it about that he becomes good or evil,
according to whether he adopts or does not adopt into his maxim the
incentives which this predisposition carries with it (an act which must be left
wholly to his own free choice).36

The Kantian system of ethics does not allow for a seemingly unconscious
pursuit of impulse as a basis for imputing or absolving one’s actions. Instead, “every
vicious man has a concept of virtue in himself, he has the understanding to recognize
what is evil”37 and he chooses to act contrary to duty—he is not forced to do so. In
this way, Kant clearly rejects the notion that man is inherently evil or ‘predisposed to
sin’ as an original condition of life. Indeed, according to Kant, in a being

constituted purposively for life, we assume as a principle that there will be
found in it no instrument for some end other than what is also most
appropriate to that end and best adapted to it….in a being that has reason and
will, if the proper end of nature were its preservation, its welfare, in a word its
happiness [in the subjective sense], then nature would have hit upon a very
bad arrangement in selecting the reason of the creature to carry out this
purpose. For all the actions that the creature has to perform for this purpose,
and the whole rule of its conduct, would be marked out for it far more

36 Religion, p. 40.
37 Lectures on Ethics, p. 123.
accurately by instinct, and that end would have thereby been attained much more surely than it ever can be by reason…Nature would have taken upon itself the choice not only of ends, but also of means and, with wise foresight, would have entrusted them both simply to instinct.\textsuperscript{38}

We see here, again, Kantian teleology distinguishing the human condition from that of animals, and accordingly setting the human will apart from mere impulse. The Kantian commitment to the goodness of man is required by the moral law itself, for if man were not endowed with a capacity for choice, apart from sensuous impulses, there would be no basis for the consideration of himself as an author of his obligation because he would be unable to comprehend himself as an intelligible being free of such impulses. Consideration of the self as a member of the intelligible realm yields a respect for humanity and—as each man is himself a participant in that humanity—it yields self-respect and respect for the moral law as the principle that commands in accordance with that humanity.

When considering the way in which one exercises free choice, we know that it consists in selecting an object of choice that has unconditioned value and adopting it as an end. We recall that pre-Kantian ethical theories made one’s own happiness or the perfection of others into the end that action was aimed at and such action was said to be virtuous. But, again, neither can generate duty in the Kantian theory. In the case of the former, it would be self-contradictory to believe that one’s subjective happiness could be a species of the categorical imperative which requires universality under a non-contingent concept. Additionally, it was just stated that Kant ascribes worthiness of happiness to the good will, and that the conditions for a good will are

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Groundwork}, 4:395.
already present. Therefore, in order to set happiness as an end, one would have to reject the idea of a good will being originally present, and instead consider it to be an accumulated effect greater than its cause, which is self-contradictory.\(^{39}\) The idea of an altruistic duty to promote the perfection of others is equally misguided. First, the perfection of others is identical to what constitutes perfection in myself; namely that one “\textit{himself} is able to set his end in accordance with his own concepts of duty.”\(^{40}\) But the setting of one’s own end cannot, by definition, be done by someone other than the person in question, so that duty would be self-contradictory. And, again, with regard to the internal disposition of man—just as the good will is the condition of worthiness of happiness, so is that will the condition by which one is considered perfect. So, to claim that one must seek to promote the perfection of others is to say that I must develop the will of another, which even if possible would suggest that the other person’s will be regarded (by himself and others) as somehow defective. The only way to begin to correct that would be to disabuse him of that thought by demonstrating the initial perfection of the human will. Because the remedy (demonstrating the initial perfection) would require knowledge that already applies to myself and others, and therefore to himself, there would be no basis for having considered it defective in the first place. This ‘duty’, therefore, also ends in a contradiction.

\(^{39}\) See the \textit{Conflict of the Faculties}, sec. 3, for Kant’s discussion of “the quantity of good of which a person is capable.” From \textit{Kant’s Political Writings}, Reiss. Cambridge 1971 p.178-179.

\(^{40}\) \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}, 6:386.
4.3 The Two Moral Duties

Kant rejects the possibility of a duty to promote my own happiness or to promote the perfection of others, so what can be properly considered to be a duty of my free choice? Kant states that the primary duty that holds for all actions is the duty to act from duty. This is the duty generated from a respect for the moral law in general. It is the fundamental recognition of the faculty of the will as placing practical constraints on action and serving as the basis of the “virtuous disposition.”

Given the fundamental recognition of the “maxim of actions in conformity with duty,” we must then ask which ends it is a duty to set as the objects of those actions. In other words, a recognition of our freedom is a recognition of our capacity to select an end as the object of every action, and that no end is empirically forced upon us. The moral law prescribes an end that is universal and unconditioned. The concept of humanity, deserving of respect in itself and never used merely as a means, is such a concept. Therefore, humanity as an end in itself is also a duty. But the moral law requires not only a respect for humanity in general but a recognition that I, and all other rational beings, are constitutive members of humanity in general. So, when I will in accordance with the moral law, I am at the same time setting the humanity in myself and in all other rational beings as my end. As such, I generate duties to the humanity in myself and also to the humanity in others.

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43 Of course, some of our selected ends could be empirically conditioned, but even those would have been selected by us as yet another free choice.
The humanity in myself must be respected and the duty to my own humanity is a duty of self-perfection. Perfection of the humanity in myself means perfection in my actions. My actions are only free insofar as I have set my own ends in accordance with the concept of duty, so I must be sure of both my maxims and my motivation. Here, the primacy of the duty of self-knowledge becomes key. I must come to know two things about myself: first, that I have the ability (i.e., the strength and the predisposition) to will in accordance with the moral law. Second, I must know the extent to which my inclination to act stems from my empirical nature. This reveals the key to self-knowledge: the ability to cognize oneself as a member of the sensible realm, but, at the same time, as a legislating member of the intelligible realm. Grasping the concept of self as having both noumenal and phenomenal aspects affirms my self-respect and at the same time clearly guides my duties to self. As a noumenal being, my perfection lies in acting in accordance with the moral law both in maxim and in motivation. As a phenomenal being, my perfection lies in arranging nature so as to be capable of acting from my duty. Kant describes the end of one’s own perfection as the duty to cultivate one’s faculties or ‘natural predispositions.’ Because he believes cognition and desire are our two natural faculties, this duty might be expressed as ‘be both theoretically and practically reasonable.’[44] To ‘be reasonable’ is to direct the reason present in us by virtue of our humanity to the cognition of the a priori principles of reason and to their proper application in

experience. Thus, the first command of all duties to oneself is to know oneself, which is an action that simultaneously affirms and discovers the power of reason within us.

The recognition of our ‘predisposition to the good’ is premised on an understanding of the universal concept of humanity. In so far as I identify my membership in that concept, I have duties to myself aimed at my own perfection. But what of the other members? If I hold humanity as an end that is also a duty and, appropriately, constrain my actions in accordance with the moral law, then it is not merely the humanity in myself that I set as an end, but also the humanity of all (and thereby any) rational beings. How then to reconcile Kant’s dismissal of any duty to the perfection of others? If setting humanity as an end yields actions that promote my own perfection, how are those same actions to avoid being ‘for the sake of’ the perfection of another? The key to avoiding this seeming contradiction lies in an appeal to the concept of perfection. We have said that perfection is, for Kant, a will that generates actions from duty and a motivation to action from duty. Human perfection is virtue; it is the strength to act from a good will. And because Kant holds that humans are predisposed to goodness, the pursuit of perfection is not an addition to, but rather a refinement of our responsiveness to our will. If perfection were an additive property, such that ‘goodness’ was a quantity that increased or decreased, it would be an effect in need of an even greater cause, and if there were such a superior causal capacity then that capacity would be the seat of our virtue. Kant speaks directly to this in The Conflict of the Faculties, section II.
If perfection is regarded as ‘internal rectitude,’ then it is clear that I cannot have a duty to the perfection of others. Rectitude requires that I have set myself an end and motive for action in accordance with the moral law but one cannot, by definition, set an end for another. I can, however, set for myself an end that is both my own and another’s. In doing so, I further constrain my action in such a way that I respect (by not violating) that person’s ability to pursue that end. For example, if my son has adopted the end to perfect his tuba-playing, I should also adopt the end that he be allowed and/or encouraged to perfect his tuba playing. I am not directly promoting his knowledge of the instrument or pursuit of excellence as a tubist, nor am I committed to learning the tuba myself, but I might offer help where appropriate and I would certainly refrain from scheduling so many afterschool activities that preclude actions in accord with his maxim (i.e., practicing). My duty of respect for humanity both in myself and in others is thereby a duty to allow others to set and act upon their own ends (so long as the ends they select are not immoral, in which case I have no duty to aid in their pursuit). Insofar as the setting of ends and actions in accord with those ends can constitute a condition of rectitude in that person, they will thereby be acting virtuously by creating within themselves the condition of worthiness of happiness. In that way, Kant derives a duty to the happiness of others. Kant is clear that the duty to promote the happiness of others is not a duty to act only “in accordance with my concepts of happiness…rather I can benefit him only in accordance with his concepts of happiness.”\(^45\) I could not, for instance, compel my

\(^{45}\) *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:454.
son to abandon the tuba in favor of the flute that I may enjoy and have a talent for playing. This does not, as stated before, create an obligation of me to participate in or facilitate some immoral act that another believes will make him happy; the reason is that no obligation (either to self or others) can be generated from a feeling. Instead, as the passage states, only a concept, as an object of action, can generate obligation. Therefore, I am assured that my duty to others involves the same concept that generates my duty to self, namely the concept of humanity.

The command that follows from the duty to others is to love and respect their humanity. But again, love and respect are not taken as mere feelings; instead they are maxims of action. Respect for others requires that I recognize their humanity as an end and that I thereby moderate my own ends so as never to treat others simply as a means. This is a corollary to the duty to self that generates self-respect because the knowledge of the dignity inherent in all human beings prohibits one from acting “contrary to the equally necessary self-esteem of others.”46 Love of others is divided into the duties of sympathy, beneficence, and gratitude. Through sympathy I can identify the ends of another and adopt them as my own so as to be of assistance in promoting those ends for another’s well-being (beneficence). Those actions generate a reciprocal obligation of gratitude in another “to render equal services to the benefactor if he can receive them or, if he cannot, to render them to others.”47 In this way, the duties of love are self-sustaining in that they create an obligation for me not only as benefactor, but as a recipient of beneficence.

4.4 Respect For Humanity

The duties to self and others are further categorized as ‘narrow’ or ‘wide.’ Narrow duties are also referred to as ‘negative’ and command specifically. For instance, the duty to respect others is classified as a negative, narrow duty by Kant. It is a restriction on how I may act. To refrain from exalting oneself above others is to “keep myself within my own bounds”\textsuperscript{48} because arrogance is a self-contradiction. The maxim that generates my self-esteem is based on respect for my humanity as a particular instance of humanity in general. To say that my humanity is better than another’s is to deny the very concept of humanity in general on which my self-worth relies. The obligation generated by the moral law within me applies absolutely regardless of any contingent circumstance. Likewise is my duty of self-preservation. This is a narrow duty to refrain from killing, defiling, or stupefying oneself. Again, the only person placed under obligation by these maxims is myself, with regard to content; but these maxims are commands of \textit{all} as a law of the will in general, with regard to scope. In other words, every person by virtue of his humanity is subject to negative, narrow duties that serve as constraints on his individual will. The maxim of self-preservation is based on the recognition of the worth of a being endowed with a capacity to will, anything that limits that capacity is a denial of that value and is, again, self-contradictory.

At this point I think it’s worth discussing Kant’s prohibition on suicide. It is generally taken as truth that this prohibition is, for Kant, based on the ‘self-defeating’

\textsuperscript{48} Metaphysics of Morals, 6:450.
principle that is also used to characterize the universalizability criterion of the
categorical imperative. It may seem, at first blush, that suicide is prohibited simply
because it ends life. But this is not the case. Certainly it would be a matter of
prudence that one doesn’t kill himself, but this, without anything further, would mean
that it is permissible to have a wish to commit suicide so long as one does not act on
it. That makes life the source of value to be preserved by any means necessary. Or
by contrast, one could weigh the value of his life against the value of other things (say
‘saving my life’ vs. ‘preventing the death of three others’) and come up with cases in
which one person should be sacrificed for the sake of some others, thereby being used
simply as a means. Kant explicitly rejects this. In his Lectures, he rejects the
placement of value simply on life itself, stating that “if I cannot preserve my life
except by violating my duties towards myself, I am bound to sacrifice my life rather
than violate those duties.” So, while the maxim ‘if I take my life, then I cannot go
on living’ yields a contradiction, this does not impose any restriction on action
because it does not have the appropriate object as its end and therefore could not be
considered in conformity with the moral law anyway. In most writings, Kant groups
his discussion of suicide with discussion of the prohibitions against lust, gluttony, and
drunkenness. While the latter three might, under certain circumstances, shorten one’s
life, that’s not the relevant consideration. Joining an army during war time might also
shorten one’s life, but its not explicitly prohibited by Kant. In fact, he admits that

49 Lectures on Ethics, p. 151.
such an act might be “noble and high-minded.” Therefore, the common ground in these Kantian prohibitions must lie elsewhere. For Kant, restrictions on action are a matter of avoiding a self-contradiction in the object of the will, and with respect to how one treats his own person, the object in question is not his body, his life per se, but his humanity. Each person is, according to Kant, endowed with a will that has an inherent capacity for goodness. It is by virtue of that capacity, the humanity within me, that I am deserving of respect, both self-respect and the respect of others. If I allow contingent considerations such as a physical desire (for alcohol, for pleasure, for relief from a feeling of discomfort or an appearance of hardship) to guide my actions, then I am treating myself merely as an animal and violating not only my own duty of self-esteem, but the respect owed all others by denying the worth of humanity in general. I would be setting for myself a maxim that treats my humanity, as an end in itself, as an exceptional species rather than a necessary, universal object; placing less worth in my humanity than in humanity in general. It is the opposite of holding myself in arrogant self-esteem above all others, it is instead debasing myself. Therefore, the desire to commit suicide is prohibited and whether I carry it out is merely a matter of luck (depending on how you look at it). So, the duty of self-preservation is a duty not to negate the grounds of humanity itself, be it through debasing myself temporarily or permanently. In the Lectures Kant is more explicit in providing the basis of this prohibition. He states,

[h]umanity in one’s own person is something inviolable, it is a holy trust…a being who existed of his own necessity could not possibly destroy

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50 *Lectures on Ethics*, p. 150.
himself...man can only dispose of things; beasts are things in this sense; but man is not a thing, not a beast. If he disposes of himself, he treats his value as that of a beast. He who so behaves, who has no respect for human nature and makes a thing of himself, becomes for everyone an object...he has made a thing of himself...suicide is not abominable and inadmissible because life should be highly prized...[but] because it degrades human nature below the level of animal nature and so destroys it.  

This description of the narrow negative duties, as a recognition of humanity’s role as the object of virtuous action, is crucial to a proper understanding of Kantian political theory. As we will see, the duties of virtue serve as the meta-duties of civility which are the framework within which the duties of right inhere. Because of this connection, respect for humanity serves as the supreme principle of free action both in theory and in practice.

4.5 The Derivation of Particular Duties

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant provides a method of application of pure practical reason that eliminates the conflict between judgments of appearances and cognitions of things in themselves; the conflict between the conditioned series and the unconditioned determining ground of the causality of that series. His aim is to expose the “optical illusion in the self-consciousness” which confuses the inclinations of desire with the determinations of the will. Returning to the first duty of self-knowledge, Kant asserts that he is not only warranted in thinking of his existence as a noumenal agent, but can also see “in the moral law a purely intellectual

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51 *Lectures on Ethics*, p.151-152.
determining ground of my causality (in the sensible world).” The Kantian method of applying pure practical reason is thereby aimed at providing “a view into a higher, immutable order of things in which we already are and in which we can henceforth be directed, by determinate precepts, to carry on our existence in accordance with the highest vocation of reason.” The method proceeds as follows: first, to recognize the moral law as providing a ground of obligation and second, to investigate whether the moral law is the incentive for action. The former is the concept of moral correctness, the latter produces the concept of moral worth.

Narrow duties are primarily concerned with moral correctness, assuring that particular maxims conform to the moral law. Wide duties build upon what’s narrowly allowed and provide a latitude of choice that directly corresponds to the moral worth of an action. Kant sometimes compares the distinction to a distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. For Kant, the perfect/imperfect distinction is a token/type difference. Perfect duties, whether they are commanding the commission or omission of an act, have in their very maxim a particular act. By contrast, imperfect duties (which Kant refers to as wide duties in the Metaphysics of Morals) command actions of a particular type. For instance, the duty of beneficience may command that I aid others in achieving their ends. It may even command when I see someone (say, Mr. Smith) in need that I aid Mr. Smith in particular, but it remains my choice as to the means used. Imperfect duties also admit of conflicts in

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53 _Critique of Practical Reason_, 5:115. Parentheses are original to the text.
54 _Critique of Practical Reason_, 5:108.
55 I do not believe that the set of narrow duties is directly identical to the set of perfect duties nor that the set of wide duties is identical to the set of imperfect duties, but that is not a necessary relationship for the purposes of the present discussion.
which I have discretion in a way that perfect duties do not. For instance, my neighbor Mr. Smith needs a ride to the hospital at the same time that Mrs. Smith needs a ride to the grocery store. It is within my power to help each of them and I should do so, but I can not perform both at once, so I have discretion in choosing which to help. The wide duty to be beneficent requires only that I help, without mandating in what particular way I do so. And the commission of my duty in taking Mr. Smith to the hospital immediately carries moral worth even though Mrs. Smith opts to take a bus to the grocery store. Duty signifies the use of my will. Free action is both a grounds of moral worth and a basis of moral judgment. As deeds are imputed to me via my free action, the failure to perform perfect duties might be thought of as a case of strict liability whereas imperfect duties allow for mitigating factors of judgment.

The terms ‘wide’ and ‘narrow’ are used most clearly by Kant in discussing the ground of obligation, as required by the application of pure, practical reason. Kant states that the duties of virtue are of wide obligation because they add to the concept of duty an end that is itself a duty. This is the basis of Kant’s one universal ethical command: Act in conformity with duty from duty. That can be read in two ways. At the base of both readings is the understanding that duty is self-constraint in accordance with human freedom. But human freedom has both an internal component and an external component. Externally, it is simply the formulation of maxims of actions exercising freedom negatively considered.

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56 To say that this distinction is ‘most clear’ on this point is a relative description. The classification of duties is not at all clear, but this discussion in the Metaphysics of Morals is one glimmering coin at the bottom of a rather murky pool.

57 Metaphysics of Morals, 6:391.
Internally, it is self-constraint derived from the concept of freedom *positively* considered. The positive use of freedom requires the strength of selecting ends that it is also a duty to have. The negative use of freedom is simply the capacity to formulate maxims according to ends. From that universal command then, to act in conformity with the moral law out of respect for human freedom, comes two distinct principles of action. The Supreme Principle of the Doctrine of Right is “so act externally that the free use of your choice can coexist with the freedom of everyone in accordance with a universal law.” This principle is *analytic* in that it simply directs one, as a member of a kingdom of ends, to act in the way a legislating member of said kingdom would act—with respect for both self and others as co-legislators in accord with the moral law. The Supreme Principle of the Doctrine of Virtue requires that we “act in accordance with a maxim of ends that it can be a universal law for everyone to have.” Both principles require that we act in conformity with duty for duty’s sake but the scope of duty differs. The doctrine of virtue has, as its duty, the setting of ends that are themselves duties. The doctrine of right has, as its duty, the selection of maxims that recognize the self and every other rational being as an end in itself.

Acting in conformity with duty *from* duty generates a reciprocity of obligation in that to act from duty is to act from a concept of the noumenal self. When that noumenal self directs actions externally, the reciprocity of obligation is a ‘reciprocity of rights.’ When it is directed internally, it generates a reciprocity of end-setting such that I both consider myself to act from a duty to myself (in my end of self-perfection) and others.


(in their happiness) and expect that others also consider my happiness and their own perfection as incentives of their actions.

Reciprocity, considered in Chapter 2 as a meta-ethical concept, showed how freedom and morality are necessarily connected. Reciprocity brought to bear in Chapter 3, and presently, as a concept of ethical judgment provided the means of deriving particular ethical duties from the categorical imperative. What is left now is to see how the Kantian notion of reciprocity in motion, translates into politico-socio requirements of civil society. In doing so, Kant’s later writings refer, full circle, to his early writings about the reciprocal motion of matter. We must know how the actions of individual human agents effect the actions of their peers and what laws can be identified as governing those interactions.