Chapter 5: The Political Requirements of Morality

The humanity in ourselves is manifest in our capacity to will and our strength to resist sensuous inclinations in favor of acting from respect of the moral law. Our humanity is owed respect by virtue of our inner faculty of judgment (conscience) that reminds us of, and affirms within us, our predisposition to the good. The concept of humanity requires that we conceive of ourselves as members of an intelligible realm where we legislate commands free of empirical considerations. The concept of my humanity puts me in awe of myself as legislator and as agent in the natural world through my power of determining my own ends. But the Kantian conception of morality is not an individualistic, egoistic, or libertarian doctrine of ethical isolationism. In this chapter, I will explore in more details the duties to self and others that are derived from the concept of humanity. I will then reintroduce the reciprocity requirement in an examination of duties to the others. This section will build upon Christine Korsgaard’s work in describing the Kantian nature of moral commitments. I will then present a Kantian argument for the obligatory pursuit of civil society.

5.1 Duties to Self

The concept of my humanity, of my inner freedom, does not simply yield a set of self-regarding duties. While it is true that respect for my humanity obligates me to perfect myself, that same concept of humanity from which I derive my self-esteem necessarily includes the recognition of other rational beings and obligates me to respect the humanity in them as well. I am not an end in myself, but my humanity is.
I may feel sad, helpless, in need of pleasures, etc. but to act in accordance with those inclinations is to act from my animal nature. To get drunk, commit suicide, or anything of the kind is to use my humanity as a means only and not to respect that humanity as an end in itself. Likewise, I may be inclined to lie to someone in order to ‘save face’ or to hit someone out of anger, but these actions treat another person as merely a means to the satisfaction of a conditioned end.

The categorical imperative always to use the humanity in myself or others as an end and never as merely a means is a complex consideration for a human agent to put into practice. I will unpack it a bit here, by breaking it down into what I will call the ‘five point test for a morally good action’:

1. That I set my own humanity as an end.
2. That I recognize and respect the humanity in others insofar as it is identical to my own humanity.
3. That I act to set the humanity in others as an end. (from 2 + 1)
4. That I never use the humanity in myself as merely a means.
5. That I never use the humanity in others as merely a means. (from 4 + 2)

So, any principle of action I set for myself should pass this five point test. Recall that the humanity in ourselves and others is the capacity and disposition to be virtuous. Virtue, as a self-perfected good will, is the condition of worthiness of happiness. So, the two principles of action that come from the categorical imperative are the duty of self-perfection and the duty to the happiness of others. Each of the these two duties is
a class of aggregated particular duties derived from a consideration of the object of action as a member of both the phenomenal and noumenal worlds.

The first command of duties to oneself, as previously discussed, is not only to acknowledge an individual’s dual membership but also to embrace the positive qualities associated with the noumenal aspect and to respect our own productive power. The duty is to observe one’s conscience in action. The conscience, according to Kant, “must be thought of as the subjective principle of being accountable to God for all one’s deeds.”¹ This is not meant to serve as proof of the existence of God, but to establish a sense of accountability to a “morally lawgiving reason distinct from us yet present in our inmost being, and of submitting to the will of this being as the rule of justice.”² My conscience “commands me to make the highest possible good in the world the final object of all my conduct”³ and is thereby a judge of my motives and arbiter of my will’s efficacy in generating maxims of action in accordance with that end. But, again, because human beings are not holy and therefore not wholly able to act in accord with the moral law, our conscience serves as the holy ideal within us that checks “to make sure of this unending progress of one’s maxims toward this model and of their consistency in continual progress, that is, virtue.”⁴ The humanity in myself, as the ground of the possibility of virtue, is an end that is also a duty. The duty is that of self-perfection. The perfection of my humanity generates perfect and imperfect duties. The perfect duties are the conditions that maintain the humanity in

³ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:129.
⁴ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:33.
myself and preserve the possibility of self-perfection. The imperfect duties in this class are actions that both correspond to and further my own humanity. Each duty, as a duty to myself is an instantiation of an obligation that I place myself under; a relation only possible when the duty of self-knowledge is fulfilled and I acknowledge both my sensible and my intelligible personality.

With respect to myself as a sensible personality, my perfect duty is self-preservation. This is a duty of omission, commanding that I not succumb to animalistic (i.e. sensuous) impulses that would lead to “disposing of [my]self as a mere means to some discretionary end.”\(^5\) With respect to the noumenal aspect of myself, coupled with the recognition of my conscience, the perfect duty owed is to refrain from diminishing my own dignity. This means that I should not act in a way that engenders self-contempt (for example, by lying) nor the disregard of others (by putting oneself beneath others either in words or deeds).

The imperfect duties to oneself are also divided between those which stem from the empirical world and those which are due to the intelligible aspect of self. Empirically, humans have “natural powers” or capacities that vary in degree but are meant to be cultivated so that one can be “in a pragmatic respect a human being equal to the end of his existence.”\(^6\) This is an imperfect duty of wide scope because while the action of ‘type Y’ is commanded (to cultivate talents) no particular ‘token y’ is necessitated. So, one is afforded “a latitude for free choice”\(^7\) in determining which

\(^{5}\) Metaphysics of Morals, 6:423.
\(^{6}\) Metaphysics of Morals, 6:445.
\(^{7}\) Metaphysics of Morals, 6:446.
talents are cultivated and to what extent. This duty is aimed at improving the worth of humanity in oneself by being “a useful member of the world.” Finally, there is a duty to oneself on the basis of one’s capacity for virtue. The absolute command, to act in accordance with duty from duty is a matter of continual progress due to the human disposition. The corresponding duty to ‘be perfect’ is a command to fulfill all duties and to strive for virtue.

All of the duties to self stem from the categorical imperative’s requirement that I act in such a way that I always treat the humanity in myself as an end and never merely as a means. As the fundamental precept of free action, the categorical imperative requires that we choose only the maxims that we could will to be universal law. The concept of ‘universality’ cannot apply to anything contingent, so it requires the concept of a merely intelligible, noumenal realm. The concept of humanity captures this idea by joining membership in a noumenal realm with the legislative power of a will. The requirement that the will respect its humanity—treating it as an end in itself and not merely as a means—assures that every rational agent can, through free action, act as “a lawgiving member of the universal kingdom of ends.”

The humanity formulation specifically references the humanity “in the person of any other” as an end to which maxims of free action must aim. This idea, in the context of the co-legislating members of the kingdom of ends, generates the key concept of moral relations: reciprocity. Insofar as I respect my own humanity, I must recognize

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8 Ibid.
9 Metaphysics of Morals, 6:446.
10 Groundwork, 4:438.
11 Groundwork, 4:429.
my ability to be a generator of maxims that hold universally because they have, as their end, a noumenal object. This means that I generate obligations for myself only insofar as I share a basis for obligation with all other persons. Likewise, to respect the humanity in other persons is to recognize their membership as legislators in the noumenal realm and to accept as my own obligation all that is consistent with what they obligate themselves to. In other words, my lawgiving (if properly done) is universal, as is another’s. Because we cannot self-legislate a maxim that is self-contradictory, we must accept that virtuous actions are to be promoted in whatever way we can. This reciprocity of obligation is both the condition and consequence of free action. I, as an agent, have particular goals to pursue (i.e., the cultivation of my particular talents) and likewise with every rational human agent. While I pursue those goals I must also consider the way in which my pursuit may be helped or harmed by others’ similar pursuits and likewise, how their pursuits may be helped or harmed by my own. Reciprocity, by definition, requires two entities harmonizing purposes. I cannot achieve reciprocity with myself. Insofar as other agents exist, I am called into a reciprocal relationship with them. To do so would admit, among other things, that my empirical character is able to impart obligation on my intelligible character in the same way that the intelligible character formulates maxims in accord with the moral law. Kant cannot accept this consequence and it’s clear that his moral theory contains the means of avoiding it. Reciprocity as a component of virtuous action requires interaction between entities with the ability to mutually affect each other. Insofar as my actions can instantiate the moral law, my
actions must be regarded as *interactions* with other similarly-obligated agents. Therefore, human interaction is both *required by* and *conducted in accordance with* the moral law.

5.2 Duties to Others

The role of reciprocity in the consideration of ourselves as moral agents, and the requirement of community that such a consideration brings is well-presented in Christine Korsgaard’s *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. In it, Korsgaard states that “when you hold someone responsible, you are prepared to exchange lawless individual activity for reciprocity in some or all of its forms.” I discussed in Chapter 2 how a consideration of moral judgment leads to the Kantian doctrine of transcendental idealism in that moral judgments imply freedom and freedom requires that we view an agent as something other than empirically determined. I concluded that this transcendental idealism was critical to generating Kantian obligation, in that man must be able to make a connection, upon his own self-reflection, between himself as an empirical being and as a being participating in a non-empirical, transcendental realm. Korsgaard endorses this ‘two standpoints’ reading of Kant and uses that view to explain the way in which moral judgments are an affirmation of the humanity in ourselves and in others. She shores up Kant’s argument that the moral judgments we pass upon ourselves and others are postulates of practical reason in that

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12 Korsgaard, p. 189.
each judgment is “formulated theoretically, but is practical and moral in its basis.”

Yet moral judgments, it appears, ascribe a matter of fact to an individual, though Kant himself says on several occasions that we should be careful not to assume that we know the motives of others. In this way, our moral judgments of others ascribe facts to others, as we see them. In Kantian terms, these are judgments on the empirical character of man. In this way, a moral judgment, formulated theoretically on the basis of an appeal to the notion of respect for humanity that is, in itself, a non-empirical concept, brings the non-empirical standpoint of ‘the judge’ to bear on the empirical character of ‘the defendant.’ This is a critical point. A ‘two worlds’ view of the self would not allow such a bridge. Judgments of responsibility, of imputability as discussed earlier, carry with them the assumption of freedom. In holding someone accountable for his actions, in passing moral judgment upon his character—as we see it—we are affirming his status as a free, moral agent in the transcendental sense. Therefore, while we cannot know with certainty what his motives were in a particular situation, we do know what those motives ought to have been and the actions that ought to have followed. And we, in our ability to consider ourselves similarly situated, from two standpoints, can assign either praise or blame, but most importantly, moral responsibility, for the actions freely selected by the other. I do not mean to imply that Korsgaard makes, or would necessarily endorse, this line of argumentation. Hers was a slightly different focus on the role of humanity in moral judgments. But her conclusion leads me to believe that the rationale here

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13 Korsgaard, 208.
presented is at least a plausible interpretation of the Kantian view. For, she states, “holding others responsible is an inevitable concomitant of holding ourselves so…[because] to share our ends and reasons is to share the standpoint from which those ends and reasons are generated.” Moral judgments on this view are both the form and content of reciprocal relations amongst human beings.

Moreover, moral judgments of our own actions and the actions of others are the way in which we demonstrate respect for the humanity we collectively participate in. For example, if I were to continually make excuses for the actions of a friend, then I would, in essence fail in my duty of respect. If I recognize and respect the humanity in others, then I must stand willing to hold them accountable for their choices. Not to do so only diminishes the esteem with which I consider the ‘offender’, but it also diminishes their capacity for self-perfection, it causes them harm. As if those other-regarding reasons were not sufficient evidence of the necessity of respect in friendship, there are two self-regarding considerations as well. First, by making excuses for the actions of another I set myself apart from the collective notion of humanity, which is inconsistent with my duty of self-perfection. After all, what gives me privileged license to excuse behavior that I would judge differently apart from a personal feeling of protection for a friend? Second, by failing to hold others responsible for their actions, I have indicated that I have not dealt with them in a way that promotes honest self-development, so I have, by definition not promoted their happiness. That is a violation of duty I have as a moral agent myself, another way in which I have violated my duty of self-perfection. Thus, the
disposition of friendship, the spirit of benevolence, which Kant urges us to cultivate, is—and must remain—premised on the reciprocity of respect. According to that respect, there is a mutual commitment to always regard the other as a subject of moral worth which means simultaneously retaining my commitment to their happiness and to my own self-perfection.

5.3 The Pursuit of Moral Reciprocity

Even apart from the circumstances of friendship, the duties of virtue, that of my own perfection and the happiness of others, are the instantiation of this moral reciprocity. My duty of self-perfection is a duty to act virtuously: in accord with duty and from duty. The product of these actions is the achievement of (or at least progress towards) my moral worthiness, which is worthiness of happiness. Upon closer examination, it will be clear that the duties to others, aimed at their happiness, obligate us to actions that allow and/or encourage others to fulfill their duty of self-perfection. So, my duty of self-perfection, insofar as it is a duty to act virtuously, obligates me because it is also a duty that everyone else should have, and actions in accord with that duty require my cooperation in the setting of ends so that others can act in accord with their established maxims. Whether I act consistently or effectively according to that duty has no bearing on my obligation because, as Kant says, there is only one kind of ethical obligation, “that of virtue as such.”\textsuperscript{14} So the disposition, the possibility of acting, is what must be promoted and preserved. And this is the

\textsuperscript{14} Metaphysics of Morals, 6:469.
reciprocal obligation of all human beings because their virtue consists in having a good will, and a good will is only possible insofar as one both respects and loves (in the sense of self-esteem) the humanity in himself. Just as duties to oneself are aimed at preserving the dignity of humanity, one is also “under obligation to acknowledge, in a practical way, the dignity of humanity in every other human being.”15 Therefore, arrogance, defamation, and ridicule are prohibited because they diminish the worth of humanity in others. With regard for having love for another, the duty is that of mutual benevolence “in accordance with the principle of equality, and permits you to be benevolent to yourself on the condition of your being benevolent to every other as well.”16 However, this duty “costs us nothing” and is meritorious only as it leads to the imperfect duties of beneficence, gratitude, and sympathy. The duties require, roughly, that we help those in need, repay favors, and take an active interest in the fate of others.

In the same way that an obligation to oneself is an obligation “to the humanity in his own person” and requires self-love and self-respect as balancing considerations; so, too, does an obligation to others to “constantly come closer…[yet] to keep themselves at a distance” provide both perfect duties of omission and imperfect duties of commission.17 Just as it is a command of morally practical reason to cultivate one’s capacities and to be in a pragmatic respect a human being equal to the end of human existence, it is a command of morally practical reason for each to

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15 Metaphysics of Morals, 6:465.
16 Metaphysics of Morals, 6:451.
17 Metaphysics of Morals, 6:418.
consider all others as “fellow human beings…united by nature in one dwelling place so that they can help one another.” I am thereby commanded, by my own will, to recognize my condition, as a human being, as “a being meant for society,” because society (taken as a civil state and not merely a ‘state of nature’) is the only way that I can fulfill my duties to myself to “be a useful member of the world,” to prevent others from treading “with impunity on [my] rights,” and to “cultivate a disposition of reciprocity.”

That reciprocity of obligation holds between persons is clear from the concept of humanity as a consequence of C.I. However, it regards persons and their interrelationship as noumenal beings. But while our love and respect for humanity is a love and respect for an end in itself, humans are also empirical beings that participate in a realm of appearances. We know that our virtue lies in our ability to harmonize our obligation with our motivation such that we act in accordance with duty and from duty. So, the idea of reciprocity must also hold in the empirical realm so that we are, in all ways, able “to confer on the sensible world the form of a whole of rational beings.” The categorical imperative obligates us to strive for virtue and that requires that we work towards self-perfection and the happiness of others. Such ends (that are also duties) require us to bring about the empirical conditions that allow for pursuit of those ends. Only by that pursuit will we maintain and promote the

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20 *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:446.
23 *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:43.
conditions of virtue. Virtue, as the condition of ‘worthiness of happiness,’ is both the pinnacle of ‘self-perfection’ and the only way in which others might be happy. So, our internal law-giving requires that we bring about the similar condition of external lawgiving. That condition is a civil state so constituted to conform “most fully to principles of right; it is that condition which reason, by a categorical imperative, makes it obligatory for us to strive after.”  

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24 Metaphysics of Morals, 6:318.