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Author(s): Keith Simmons

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KANT ON MORAL WORTH

Keith Simmons

“Gladly I serve my friends, but alas I do it with pleasure.
Hence I am plagued with doubt that I am not a virtuous person.”
“Sure, your only resource is to try to despise them entirely,
And then with aversion to do what your duty enjoins you.”¹

SCHILLER’S well-known joke expresses a worry that many have felt about Kant’s account of morally worthy actions. Kant appears to hold that an action has moral worth if *and only if* it is done from the motive of duty. This means that a dutiful action, such as helping one’s friend, has no moral worth if done from a motive other than duty; helping one’s friend out of affection, for example, is not morally worthy. But this seems unacceptable: why should a dutiful action performed with pleasure have no moral worth? And why should helping one’s friend gladly, out of affection, be morally less worthy than helping one’s friend resentfully, out of duty?

The aim of this paper is to develop an account of moral worth which is true to Kant, and spares him Schiller’s mockery. I shall argue first, that a proper understanding of Kant’s view of moral worth requires a distinction between the moral worth of an action and the moral worth of a person, and second, that corresponding to this distinction, Kant suggests two different models for the ascription of moral worth (Section I). Neither model alone is sufficient for a genuinely Kantian account of moral worth. Together, they supply an account of *overdetermined* dutiful actions (Section II), and a reply to Schiller’s objection (Section III).²

I: MORALLY WORTHY ACTIONS AND MORALLY WORTHY PERSONS

Suppose a shopkeeper deals fairly with an inexperienced customer. Under what conditions does this *action* have moral worth? Kant writes in the *Groundwork*:

An action done from duty has its moral worth, *not in the purpose* to be attained by it, but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon; it depends, therefore, not on the realization of the object of the action, but solely on the *principle of volition* in accordance with which, irrespective of all objects of the faculty of desire, the action has been performed. (G, 67-68; 399-400.)

A maxim, Kant says, “is the subjective principle of a volition” (G, 69 fn *). A maxim is a principle on which a *subject* acts, and is to be understood as

restricted to the subject. For example, the shopkeeper's maxim might be expressed by the formula "I shall always be honest in my dealings with others," or by the formula "I shall always give the right change in competitive circumstances." The former, but not the latter, is the maxim of a morally worthy action.³

Suppose the shopkeeper has adopted the maxim, "I shall always be honest in my dealings with others." Corresponding to this subjective principle is a practical *law*, "an objective principle (that is, one which would also serve subjectively as a practical principle for all rational beings if reason had full control over the faculty of desire)" (*ibid.*). Here, the corresponding objective practical law is expressed by the formula "Always act honestly."⁴ Now, says Kant, when the shopkeeper acts from duty, her will is determined objectively by this practical law, and subjectively by the maxim, so that inclinations play no role. Kant writes:

Now an action done from duty has to set aside altogether the influence of inclination, and along with inclination every object of the will; so there is nothing left able to determine the will except objectively the *law* and subjectively *pure reverence* for this practical law, and therefore the maxim of obeying this law even to the detriment of all my inclinations. (G, 68-69; 400-401.)

When a person acts in a morally worthy way, she acts in a way that expresses her rational nature; she acts out of respect for laws which all fully rational beings would freely legislate for themselves. This is, for Kant, the main significance of morally worthy actions. The person who acts from duty manifests her good will, the highest good. A morally worthy action is the action of a freely committed rational agent, an agent whose will is entirely uninfluenced by nonmoral inclinations, at least on the occasion of the given action.

So it is not enough that the action conforms to the moral law, but

it must also be done *for the sake of the moral law*: where this is not so, the conformity is only too contingent and precarious, since the non-moral ground at work will now and then produce actions which accord with the law, but very often actions which transgress it". (G, Preface, viii, 390; see also the *Religion*, 26.)

The shopkeeper may do the right thing because she recognizes that in competitive circumstances it would be bad for business to overcharge inexperienced customers. But then the action, though it conforms with duty, has *no* moral worth, since it is not done for the sake of duty, but from nonmoral inclinations. And the profit motive may lead to dishonest actions in changed circumstances: the shopkeeper may deal unfairly with customers once she has cornered the market. The subjective principle "I shall do whatever is profitable" is not the maxim of a morally worthy action; nor is "I shall always act honestly, except when the profit motive says not to."

The moral worth of an action, then, depends on how the action was

willed. The only actions that have moral worth are those which spring from a good will. I shall label what I take to be Kant's model for the ascription of moral worth to *actions*, the *genesis model*. According to this model, an action has moral worth *if and only if it is done from duty*.

But Kant's concern is not just with the moral worth of actions; it is with the moral worth of *persons* too. Although the emphasis of the *Groundwork* is on the moral worth of actions, it is not exclusively so. In the *Groundwork*, Kant discusses the worth of a person's character as he investigates the moral aspects of a good will. Consider this example:

Still further: if nature had implanted little sympathy in this or that man's heart; if (being in other respects an honest fellow) he were cold in temperament and indifferent to the suffering of others—perhaps because, being endowed with the special gift of patience and robust endurance in his own sufferings, he assumed the like in others or even demanded it; if such a man (who would in truth not be the worst product of nature) were not exactly fashioned by her to be a philanthropist, would he not still find in himself a source from which he might draw a worth far higher than any that a good-natured temperament can have? Assuredly, he would. It is precisely in this that the worth of character begins to show—a moral worth and beyond all comparison the highest—namely that he does good, not from inclination, but from duty. (G, 66; 398-399.)

The morally worthy action is a manifestation of a morally worthy character, a character which draws its moral worth from the moral law. Kant writes that

nothing but the *idea of the law* in itself, which admittedly is present only in a rational being—so far as it, and not an expected result, is the ground determining the will—can constitute that pre-eminent good which we call moral, a good which is already present in the person acting on this idea and has not to be awaited merely from the result. (G, 69; 401.)

The good or morally worthy person instantiates the moral law for which we are to feel reverence:

All reverence for a person is properly only reverence for the law (of honesty and so on) of which that person gives us an example . . . All moral *interest*, so-called, consists solely in *reverence* for the law. (G, 69n; 401n.)

It is clear that in these passages Kant is concerned with what makes a *person* morally worthy, or good. Indeed, one could characterize the structure of Chapter 1 of the *Groundwork* as follows: its aim is to discover the supreme moral principle, and the method is to take the morally good person (with a good will) and see what is true of this person.

Kant's concern with the moral worth of a person is found elsewhere in his writings. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant discusses virtue in terms of the worth of a person. According to Kant, virtue, "as the worthiness to be happy" (CPrR, 114; 110), is the *supreme* good. The perfect good,⁵ however, is a synthesis of virtue (or morality) and happiness (see CPrR, 115; 110), with "happiness in exact proportion to morality (as the

worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy)” (CPrR, 115; 110). (This echoes something Kant says in the opening paragraph of the *Groundwork*: “. . . a good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition of our very worthiness to be happy” (G, 61)).

Kant goes on to say that though the virtuous or upright person must be conscious of her virtuousness in order to be happy, you cannot make someone virtuous by providing the incentive that consciousness of being virtuous will produce happiness. This incentive will not work for a person not yet virtuous.

For prior to this no feeling for any moral worth can be found in a subject. A man, if he is virtuous, will certainly not enjoy life without being conscious of his righteousness in each action, however favourable fortune may be to him in the physical circumstances of life; but can one make him virtuous before he has so high an estimation of the moral worth of his existence merely by commending to him the contentment of spirit which will arise from the consciousness of righteousness for which he has as yet no sense? (CPrR, 120; 116.)

In the *Religion*, Kant returns to the point that the morally worthy person does not merely *conform* to the moral law. Our shopkeeper may be motivated by profit to deal honestly with customers—but then he only “obeys the law to the *letter*” (R, 25) and not the spirit, since he acts from some fortuitously aligned nonmoral maxim. Of this man (of “good morals” but not “morally good” (*ibid.*)), Kant writes:

The maxim, then, in terms of whose goodness all moral worth of the individual must be appraised, is thus contrary to the law, and the man, despite all his good deeds, is nevertheless evil. (R, 26.)

In this passage, Kant is suggesting what we may call *the fitness model*⁶ for the ascription of moral worth to a *person* on an occasion. On this model, a person is morally worthy *on an occasion if and only if she has adopted the appropriate moral maxim*. To paraphrase Kant, there is a fit between the will of the morally worthy agent and the moral law (See CPrR, 133; 128).

Now it might be thought that our two models coincide: that is, an *agent* on occasion O is morally worthy according to the fitness model if and only if the action performed on occasion O is morally worthy according to the genesis model. *But this is not so*. This biconditional breaks down in certain cases.

For the first case, consider this passage from the *Groundwork*:

Even if, by some special disfavour of destiny or by the niggardly endowment of step-motherly nature, this will is entirely lacking in power to carry out its intentions; if by its utmost effort it still accomplishes nothing, and only good will is left (not, admittedly as a mere wish, but as the straining of every means so far as they are in our control); even then it would still shine like a jewel for its own sake as something which has full value in itself. (G, 62; 394.)

It is true that actions done from duty are manifestations of a good will. But a good will might exist *without* there being corresponding actions done from duty. Kant allows that an agent may have adopted the appropriate moral maxim, but be quite unable to act in accordance with it.

There is a second kind of case in which the models diverge. Let us note first that Kant does not endorse the “fantastically virtuous” man, “who admits *nothing* morally indifferent and strews all his steps with duties, as with man-traps” (DV, 71; 409).⁷ So, Kant allows that there may be occasions where no dutiful action is required. But there are passages in Kant’s writings that suggest that a person may be morally worthy, even when *not* acting from duty, because she is *disposed* to act dutifully.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant describes the autonomous person as having a certain *disposition*:

Freedom and the consciousness of freedom, as a capacity for following the moral law with an unyielding disposition, is independence from inclinations, at least as motives determining (though not affecting) our desiring (CPrR, 122; 117. See also 121; 116.)

Such a moral disposition may not be permanent. But we are capable of making it so; that is, we are capable of becoming virtuous, Kant writes:

all moral perfection to which man can attain is only virtue, i.e. a law-abiding disposition resulting from respect for the law (CPrR, 133; 128.)

Beyond virtue is holiness, out of the reach of even the virtuous person in the sensuous world;⁸ nevertheless, it is our duty to progress towards it. Holiness is described as the “complete fitness of the will to the moral law” (CPrR, 126; 122); in a holy will there is “complete fitness of intentions to the moral law” (*ibid.*). Kant writes: “The worth of a character completely accordant with the moral law is infinite . . .” (CPrR, 133; 128).

Similar themes are found in the *Religion*. Again, the good person is characterized as having a certain disposition.⁹ Virtue is “the firmly grounded disposition strictly to fulfil our duty” (R, 19n). And, as before, our goal is to attain moral perfection (a disposition personified by the Son of God):

Now it is our universal duty as men to *elevate* ourselves to this ideal of moral perfection, that is, to this archetype of the moral disposition in all its purity (R, 54.)

At a number of places, Kant discusses the conversion of an evil person into a good one, and takes this conversion to consist in a revolution in the person’s dispositions, “a revolution in his cast of mind,” in which the person reverses the “highest ground of his maxims” (R, 43). We can only judge the strength of our maxims, and our moral goodness, through the actions we perform, Kant goes on to say; but for God, “who penetrates to

the intelligible ground of the heart (the ground of all maxims of the will)" (R, 43), this change of heart amounts to the man's becoming good. Moral worth is ascribed, from a God's eye view, according to the person's disposition, *independently of actions*. The point is reiterated later:

Although the man (regarded from the point of view of his empirical nature as a sentient being) is *physically* the self-same guilty person as before and must be judged as such before a moral tribunal and hence by himself; yet, because of his new disposition, he is (regarded as an intelligible being) *morally* another in the eyes of a divine judge *for whom this disposition takes the place of action*. (R, 68. The final emphasis is mine. See also pp. 60-61.)

These passages from the *Religion* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* demonstrate the inappropriateness of the genesis model for ascriptions of moral worth to persons. We have a duty, Kant says, to encourage in ourselves respect for the moral law, and thereby a moral *disposition*, which is the measure of moral fitness on an occasion. But such a disposition, and its associated intentions, are not captured by the genesis model. This moral disposition may be present on an occasion when there is no dutiful action to be performed.

The picture of the morally worthy person on an occasion is of a person who stands ready to do her duty. It may be that on some occasions no dutiful action is required of this person, but this does not take away from her moral worth. This is not to say that the motive of duty is idle on these occasions. As Barbara Herman points out,¹⁰ though merely permissible non-dutiful actions cannot be done from duty, the motive of duty nevertheless constrains the motive from which the action is done: this motive must pass the test of the Categorical Imperative. Although the motive of duty is indirectly involved, the action is done from a nonmoral motive, and so has no moral worth; but since the person is morally disposed, she does have moral worth. So here the genesis model and the fitness model pull apart.

Even when an action *is* required by duty, Kant allows that the agent may be morally fit, with a moral disposition, and yet fail to perform the dutiful action. And so our models diverge in a third way. This is possible because of the "weakness" or "frailty" of human nature (see R, 24-25). Although the agent *has* adopted the moral law as the dispositional maxim of her will, on a specific occasion she may be unable to express this morally good disposition: the will is weak. Now, this is not a case of straightforward heteronomy. For such an agent *will be morally self-condemning*. As Silber puts it:

The same *Willkür* that wills immorally to betray the demands of the law in a specific act wills morally, in the very same act, to condemn itself for so willing.¹¹

This moral condemnation is itself an expression of the moral disposition. Kant writes:

None but the virtuous, or he who is about to become virtuous, is capable

of this pure moral discontent (not with the disadvantages resulting from his act, but with its sheer illegality). (TP, 50.)

In saying, “What I would do, that I do not,” St. Paul expresses this moral dissatisfaction, and laments the gap between the moral disposition and the dutiful action (see R, 24-25).

There is a fourth way in which our Kantian models of moral worth differ. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant distinguishes perfect duties and imperfect duties (a distinction mentioned in passing in the *Groundwork*, at 89; 421). The key difference between these types of duties is this: once we recognize that on some occasion there is a perfect duty to perform, we are so to act; when we have an opportunity to perform an imperfect duty, we may choose not to. But we must be prepared to act according to the imperfect duty on other occasions. The form of a principle of perfect duty is “Always . . .”; the form of a principle of imperfect duty is “Sometimes . . .”¹² A perfect duty is a duty to act in a certain way; but an imperfect duty is a duty to *adopt a principle or maxim* (“Sometimes I shall promote others’ happiness,” “Sometimes I shall develop my own talents”). A perfect duty can be fulfilled by acting in the appropriate way, without the adoption of the relevant moral maxim; an imperfect duty can *only* be fulfilled by the adoption of the relevant principle.¹³ Kant writes of the imperfect duty of beneficence:

[The law says] only that I should sacrifice a part of my well-being to others without hope of requital, because this is a duty; it cannot assign determinate limits to the extent of this sacrifice. These limits will depend, in large part, on what a person’s true needs consist of in view of his temperament, and it must be left to each to decide this for himself. For a maxim of promoting another’s happiness at the sacrifice of my own happiness, my true needs, would contradict itself were it made a universal law. —Hence this duty is only a *wide* one: since no determinate limits can be assigned to what should be done, the duty has in it a play-room for doing more or less. —*The law holds only for maxims, not for determinate actions.*” (DV, 53-54; 392-393, final emphasis added.)

Here, then, the moral worth of a person who fulfils an imperfect duty is *not* a function of the moral worth of the person’s actions. The moral worth of the person who fulfils an imperfect duty lies in her readiness to act in a certain way, her having a certain disposition, grounded in the adoption of the relevant moral principle.¹⁴ A person who is not “fantastically virtuous” may on an occasion not act in a morally worthy way, and yet herself be morally worthy in having adopted the maxim of an imperfect duty. Further, it may be that the dutiful action is performed by an agent who not only has adopted the principle of say, beneficence, but has also a sufficient nonmoral motive (consider, for example, the beneficent agent who feeds her child from love). The fitness model attributes moral worth to the agent, because of the presence of the commitment to obey the moral principle. Yet here it may be the case that, though the agent stands ready to do her duty on principle should cooperating inclinations fail, it is the

nonmoral motive that brings about the action.¹⁵ So, in the case of an imperfect duty, the two models may pull apart, whether or not the dutiful action is performed.

I have argued that Kant's writings suggest a distinction between the moral worth of a person and the moral worth of an action, and a model for the attribution of each type of moral worth. Though neither on its own tells the full story about moral worth, it is clear that there is an asymmetry between the models. If an action is morally worthy according to the genesis model, then the agent is morally worthy according to the fitness model; but the converse does not hold. The fitness model has a certain priority, which we may overlook if we attend solely to the moral worth of actions. The morally worthy agent is a *rational agent*, committed to laws which free rational agents would legislate for themselves. When this agent acts in a morally worthy way, she gives *expression* to her rational nature; she *manifests* her good will. The moral worth of the action derives from the moral worth of the agent.

II. OVERDETERMINED DUTIFUL ACTIONS

Consider again our shopkeeper. Suppose she has two motives for not overcharging a customer: one motive is moral, to deal fairly out of duty; the second is self-interested, the shopkeeper recognizing that in competitive circumstances it would be bad for business to overcharge inexperienced customers. Suppose further that either one of these motives would have been sufficient for the action, even in the absence of the other; then the shopkeeper's dutiful action is *overdetermined*.

If such an action is morally worthy, then, for Kant, it is one where the agent has adopted the moral maxim, and where the agent also has a nonmoral sufficient motive, a motive which would bring about the action in the absence of the commitment to obey the moral law. Now, as we saw in Section I, where a morally worthy action is concerned, it is the moral law for which the agent feels reverence that fully determines the will. No nonmoral inclination influences the will of such a rational agent. Despite the sufficiency of the nonmoral motive, it plays no part in bringing about the action.

Let us now ask how things would be if, counterfactually, the sufficient nonmoral motive were no longer aligned with the moral maxim. We are dealing with an agent who, on the given occasion, has adopted the moral maxim. The maxim of her action, the subjective principle on which she acts, may be expressed by "I shall *always* be honest in my dealings with others." And the shopkeeper is committed to obey the corresponding objective practical law, expressed by the formula "Always act honestly." This can be an accurate description of the shopkeeper *on this occasion* only if she would have acted honestly, because of duty, *whatever* the external circumstances;¹⁶ in particular, she would have acted honestly even if she had cornered the market. As we saw in Section 1, the maxim "I shall

always deal honestly with others, except when the profit motive says not to" is not the maxim of a person who is devoted to duty.¹⁷

Of course, it is possible that on another occasion (on which, say, the shopkeeper has a monopoly), the agent acts dishonestly, motivated by profit. Now the agent is no longer devoted to duty. However, this does not undermine the worthiness of the original action. If you say that the original action does not have moral worth because its occurrence depended on an accidental feature (competition), then you are saying of the agent that *on the original occasion* she would not have acted honestly if circumstances had been different (no competition). But this amounts to saying that, on the original occasion, the maxim of the agent's action was *not* "I shall always be honest in my dealings with others"; and this contradicts our assumption.

Despite the sufficiency of the nonmoral motive on the original occasion, it is doubly subordinate. It does not bring about the action. And were it, counterfactually, not aligned with the moral law, the agent would not be swayed by it.

It might be objected that our Kantian fitness report model ascribes moral worth in an unacceptably contingent way: today I am fully committed to duty because I have nothing better to do, or I am in fear of eternal punishment, while tomorrow I am not fully committed, having found something else to do, or having lost my fear.¹⁸ The worry now is not that on some given occasion the fully committed agent would have failed to act dutifully had the circumstances been different, but rather that full commitment to duty may be transient, and depend on circumstances in a way that makes it unsuitable as a guarantee of moral worth.

But we have seen that Kant ties moral fitness to the having of a firm *disposition* to follow the moral law, a disposition which arises from respect for the law. The agent's moral fitness on an occasion stems from a disposition to obey the moral law, which in turn results not from, say, fear of eternal punishment, but from respect for the law. So the adoption of a moral maxim on an occasion is a measure of the worthiness of the agent's *character*, and not a transitory state dependent on circumstances. Still, a firm disposition to obey the moral law may not be a permanent feature of an agent: the agent may not be *virtuous*. It is possible that the agent may become corrupt or abandon morality.

Of course, there is a question about how *we* can supply criteria which distinguish this case from the case of a person who professes devotion to duty, but whose subsequent acts lead us to conclude that she was insincere (or self-deceived, or exaggerating).¹⁹ But my point here is that it is possible for an agent to be morally fit on a given occasion, in the sense I have attributed to Kant, but not remain so. The Kantian fitness report model does not ascribe moral worth only to the virtuous person. As long as the moral disposition is present, the agent has moral worth. So we must

distinguish the agent who is morally fit on an occasion from the agent who is virtuous.

And, on the other hand, we must also distinguish the agent who is morally fit on an occasion from the agent who is merely in possession of a moral motive or incentive. No one, according to Kant, repudiates the moral law: after all, everyone has within them a moral predisposition,

and were no other incentive working in opposition, he would adopt the law into his supreme maxim as the sufficient determining ground of his will; that is, he would be morally good. But by virtue of an equally innocent natural predisposition he depends upon the incentive of his sensuous nature and adopts them also (in accordance with the subjective principle of self-love) into his maxim. If he took the latter into his maxim as *in themselves wholly adequate* to the determination of the will, without troubling himself about the moral law (which, after all, he does have in him), he would be morally evil. Now, since he naturally adopts *both* into his maxim, and since, further, he would find either, if it were alone, adequate in itself for the determining of the will, it follows that if the difference between the maxims amounted merely to the difference between the two incentives (the content of the maxims), that is, if it were merely a question as to whether the law or the sensuous impulse were to furnish the incentive, man would be at once good and evil; this, however, (as we saw in the Introduction) is a contradiction. (R, 31.)

That is, if we suppose that a person fully accepts the moral law and fully accepts the principle of self-love, so that each is fully adequate to determine her will, then she would be good in that she fully accepts the moral law (the only way in which an agent can be good), and she would be bad in that she fully accepts the principle of self-love. But this situation *could not arise*; it leads to contradiction. Here Kant is referring back to this passage:

Neither can a man be morally good in some ways and at the same time morally evil in others. His being good in one way means that he has incorporated the moral law into his maxim; were he, therefore, at the same time evil in another way, while his maxim would be universal as based on the moral law of obedience to duty, which is essentially single and universal, it would at the same time be only particular; but this is a contradiction. (R, 20.)

The argument put forward in these passages is that the moral maxim and the maxim of self-love cannot exist on a par; an agent cannot accept both the moral maxim and the maxim of self-love, because the acceptance of the maxim of self-love would undermine the acceptance of the *universal* moral maxim.

The first of the above-quoted passages from the *Religion* continues:

Hence the distinction between a good man and one who is evil cannot lie in the difference between the incentives which they adopt into their maxim (not in the content of the maxim), but must rather depend upon *subordination* (the form of the maxim), *i.e. which of the two incentives he makes the*

condition of the other. Consequently man (even the best) is evil only in that he reverses the moral order of the incentives when he adopts them into his maxim. He adopts, indeed, the moral law along with the law of self-love; yet when he becomes aware that they cannot remain on a par with each other but that one must be subordinated to the other as its supreme condition, he makes the incentive of self-love and its inclinations the condition of obedience to the moral law; whereas, on the contrary, the latter, as the *supreme condition* of the satisfaction of the former, ought to have been adopted into the universal maxim of the will as the sole incentive. (R, 31.)

Any person, Kant argues, is predisposed to be motivated by the moral law and the law of self-love. The good person is the one who adopts, unrestrictedly, the moral law, to which the incentive of self-love is subordinated; the reverse is true of the evil person.

In the next paragraph, Kant recognizes that the actions of the evil person who subordinates the moral incentive to the nonmoral incentive

still may prove to be as much in conformity to the law as if they sprung from true basic principles . . . The empirical character is then good, but the intelligible character is still evil. (R, 32.)

So it is crucial to distinguish here between an agent who *has a moral incentive*, and an agent who *adopts a moral maxim*. An agent who has a moral incentive feels the pull of the moral law towards acting dutifully, yet may be swayed by other, nonmoral motives; every agent, according to Kant, is predisposed to having a moral incentive which would be sufficient in the absence of any counterinclinations. In contrast, an agent who has adopted a moral maxim, whose will is fully subordinated to the moral law, is not swayed by any counterinclinations. We can characterize Kant's evil man who nevertheless performs the dutiful action as having a moral and a nonmoral incentive tending in the same direction, and as subordinating the moral incentive to the nonmoral one (as in, "I shall always act honestly, except when the profit motive says not to"). Clearly, the presence of the moral incentive does not license the ascription of moral worth to the action (or the agent): according to Kant, the agent is evil. Consider now the corresponding good agent who acts in a morally worthy way: she too has aligned moral and nonmoral motives, and again it is not the mere presence of the moral incentive that makes the action or the agent morally worthy. The agent is good because she elevates the moral incentive to a position of reverence, where it is untouched by incentives of self-love. She adopts the moral law into her maxim.

Having a moral incentive falls short of moral fitness. And it is moral fitness that confers moral worth on a person (and, derivatively, in the appropriate circumstances, on an action). *Not even the presence of a sufficient moral incentive guarantees the moral worthiness of the person.* The shopkeeper's moral incentive may be sufficient in competitive circumstances—it may bring about the action even if the profit motive were absent. But still it might not have brought about the action if the profit motive had been, counterfactually, *in conflict*: that is, the moral motive may be suf-

ficient, while the operative subjective principle of the action is "I shall always act honestly, except when the profit motive says not to." And if this is the subjective principle of the action, neither the agent nor the action is morally worthy.

In characterizing Kant's account of moral worth, it is a mistake to think of that which confers moral worth as a sufficiently strong "tug" or "pull." This, I think, is where two recent sympathetic interpretations of Kant go wrong.²⁰ According to Richard Henson, an agent is morally worthy when performing an overdetermined dutiful action in virtue of the presence of the sufficient moral motive. But, as we have seen, this is not enough for the ascription of moral worth. As Henson himself makes explicit,²¹ the moral motive admits of degrees of strength. But for Kant, moral fitness on an occasion is grounded in the agent's adoption of a maxim which expresses her rational nature, and which *sets aside* nonmoral inclinations. The adoption of the maxim is *not* something that admits of degrees; and nor is it in competition with nonmoral inclinations. Kant's picture is not of one motive (the moral motive) being on an occasion strong enough to overcome another (the nonmoral motive), of one pull prevailing over another.

Barbara Herman suggests that an action has moral worth if the moral motive is the one on which the agent acts.²² The idea is that the mere presence of a sufficient moral motive does not give the action moral worth: the agent must act *from* the moral motive. Now, although Herman (like Henson) does not do justice to Kant's distinction between the moral worth of a person and the moral worth of an action, her line here on the moral worth of an *action* may at first seem in agreement with the genesis model. However, Herman allows that the moral motive may be present in *varying degrees of strength*; a person may act on the motive of duty only because its pull is sufficiently strong, or the pull of nonmoral motives is sufficiently weak.²³ Again, I find this picture quite unKantian. We should not describe the morally worthy action in terms of a stronger moral pull winning out against a weaker nonmoral pull. Rather, the person who performs a morally worthy action has rationally chosen to adopt the moral maxim, and has thereby set aside nonmoral inclinations.²⁴

III. SCHILLER'S JOKE

To return, finally, to Schiller's joke, we should note an ambiguity in its formulation. When on some occasion the agent serves her friend(s), we can take it either that this action is overdetermined, or that it isn't. On the first reading, the agent has adopted the moral maxim, and also has a sufficient pleasure motive. According to the fitness model, *there is no reason to doubt the moral worth of the agent*. The fitness model attributes moral worth to the agent who has adopted the moral maxim, whether or not there are cooperating sufficient nonmoral motives.

Further, there is no requirement that the agent rid herself of cooperating inclinations. Quite the reverse: in a footnote dealing with

Schiller's treatise on grace and dignity in morality, Kant writes:

And a heart which is happy in the *performance* of its duty (not merely complacent in the *recognition* thereof) is a mark of genuineness in the virtuous disposition . . . This resolve [to do better in the future], then, encouraged by good progress, must needs beget a joyous frame of mind, without which man is never certain of having really *attained a love* for the good, i.e., of having incorporated it into his maxim. (R, note **, 18-19.)

Taking the present case of serving one's friends as involving an imperfect duty, the *action* may or may not have moral worth according to whether this is an occasion on which the agent chooses to act from duty, or from the pleasure motive. But as long as she has adopted the appropriate moral maxim, the moral worth of the agent is unaffected by the choice.

On the second reading, according to which the action is not overdetermined, the agent acts from pleasure, and has not adopted the moral law into her maxim. According to the fitness model, then, the agent is not morally worthy. If the agent at no time acts on an appropriate moral maxim, then the agent accrues no moral worth from these nevertheless dutiful actions. But for Kant, this is far from being an unwelcome consequence; rather, it flows from the very heart of the theory. The agent shows no *moral* interest in the actions, does not manifest a good will, does not express her rational nature. As we have seen, according to Kant, this agent, like any agent, *does* have a duty to develop a good will. However, there is no corresponding duty to eliminate cooperating inclinations. On this second reading as well as the first, Schiller's shot misses the mark.²⁵

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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NOTES

1. Schiller's *Über die Grundlâge der Moral*, Sec. 6. Translation by A. B. Bullock, quoted in H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative* (London, 1947), p. 48.

2. This paper makes reference to the following of Kant's works: *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (henceforth G), translated by H. J. Paton (New York, 1964); *Critique of Practical Reason* (henceforth CPrR), translated by Lewis White Beck (New York, 1956); *The Doctrine of Virtue, Part II of the Metaphysic of Morals* (henceforth DV), translated by Mary J. Gregor (New York, 1964); *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (henceforth, R), translated by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York, 1960); *On the Old Saw: That Might Be Right in Theory But It Won't Work in Practice* (henceforth TP), translated by E. B. Ashton (State College, PA, 1974). Page references to the first three works are followed by page references to the Royal Prussian Academy edition.

3. Notice that if the shopkeeper wills the action under either of these maxims, the action

is willed as an action of a particular kind (as an honest action, and as a profit-making action, respectively). Kant classifies such maxims as *material* maxims, since the actions they generalize are willed as actions of a particular kind. In contrast to these is the *formal* maxim: "I shall always do my duty, whatever that may be." An action willed under this formal maxim is willed not as any particular kind of action, but solely as a *dutiful* action. Kant seems to suggest that it is only this formal maxim that confers moral worth on an action. A material maxim, like "I shall always be honest in my dealings with others," confers moral worth derivatively, because it is in accordance with the formal maxim. (See G, 68, and Paton's discussion, G, 20-21.)

In the *Groundwork*, Kant's emphasis is on material maxims; in the *Religion*, it is on the formal maxim. For ease of exposition, and with perhaps some loss of textual accuracy, I shall say that certain appropriate material maxims, as well as the formal maxim, confer moral worth on an action.

4. It is perhaps worth pointing out that the maxim is "singly" universal ("I shall *always* be honest"), whereas the corresponding practical law is "doubly" universal ("*Always, everyone* is to act honestly").

5. Virtue is the *supreme* good because it is "the condition subordinate to no other" (CPrR, 114; 110); happiness "always presupposes conduct in accordance with the moral law as its condition" (CPrR, 115; 111). The *perfect* good, of which virtue is a part, is "the object of the faculty of desire of rational finite beings. For this, happiness is also required, and indeed not merely in the partial eyes of a person who makes himself his end but even in the judgment of an impartial reason, which impartially regards persons in the world as ends-in-themselves. For to be in need of happiness and also worthy of it and yet not to partake of it could not be in accordance with the complete volition of an omnipotent rational being, if we assume such only for the sake of the argument" (CPrR, 114-115; 110).

6. In his paper: "What Kant Might Have Said: Moral Worth and the Overdetermination of Dutiful Action," *Philosophical Review* LXXXVIII, No. 1 (1979), pp. 39-54. Richard Henson dubs an analogous model "the fitness report model." As we shall see below, there are significant differences between Henson's model and the fitness model I am attributing to Kant.

7. Two papers by Thomas E. Hill argue against too rigoristic a view of Kant; see "Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation" (henceforth, IDS), *Kant-Studien*, vol. 62 (1971), pp. 55-76 and "Kant's Anti-Moralistic Strain," *Theoria*, vol. 3 (1978), pp. 131-151.

8. The virtuous person is always conscious "of a continuous propensity to transgress [the moral law] or at least to a defilement, i.e., to an admixture of many spurious (not moral) motives to obedience to the law . . ." (CPrR, 133; 128. See also 120; 116).

9. See, for example, R 19, 20, 21, 25, 33, 42n, 42-43, 44, 46, 54, 59-62, 64n, 65-72, 78, 79, 85, 173.

10. Barbara Herman, "On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty" (Section IV), *The Philosophical Review*, vol. XC (1981), pp. 359-382.

11. John R. Silber, "The Ethical Significance of Kant's *Religion*," R, cxxi.

12. In IDS, Hill points out that this difference in the form of the principles is not so clear cut. However, this characterization holds for perfect duties and paradigm imperfect duties, the duties of beneficence and the development of talents; see IDS, pp. 61-62. I follow here Hill's account of perfect and imperfect duties. My purpose, however, is different, to find textual support for a Kantian fitness model, distinct from the genesis model.

13. This point is made by Hill, IDS, 63, and by Henson (*op. cit.*), 53.
14. In IDS, Hill has a further argument against the claim that a person's worth can be determined from the positive and negative worth of her actions. This would lead to the absurd result, for Kant, that "[t]he man who is a liar and a thief but is generous on principle must be as worthy a person as the honest miser" (IDS, 70).
15. The agent may arouse suspicions that she chose this occasion to act beneficently, because circumstances gave rise to an aligned nonmoral motive. Thus the moral worth of the agent would be undermined, and the fitness model shown to be inadequate. But such suspicions are unfounded; they presuppose that the agent is acting on some qualified, and hence nonmoral, maxim (perhaps "Sometimes I shall act beneficently, as long as I can make a profit"). Full commitment to obey a law of imperfect duty, like commitment to obey a law of perfect duty, is quite independent of inclinations, whether cooperating or conflicting.
16. Of course, there are circumstances under which even the saintliest person may crumble: under torture, for example, or brainwashing. But I mean here to keep fixed the "internal" motivations and commitments of the agent, and vary only the "external" circumstances. See the next footnote also.
17. There is a commonsensical way of thinking about agents and their principles of action which allows commitments to these principles to vary in strength. One person may be whole-heartedly committed to the principle "I'll eat chocolate only on weekends"; another may be half-heartedly committed to the principle "No more chocolate for me, ever!" In particular, then, there can be half-hearted commitment to a strong principle. I take this commonsensical way of thinking to be unKantian. On my interpretation of Kant, if one's attitude or commitment is half-hearted, this should be reflected in the maxim. And so the maxim "I shall always do my duty" could only be the maxim of a person with a good will. I am grateful to Thomas E. Hill here.
18. I am indebted to Barbara Herman for pressing this objection, in correspondence.
19. Indeed, Kant thinks that even in our own case we can never be sure that we have really adopted a moral maxim: "In actual fact it is absolutely impossible for experience to establish with complete certainty a single case in which the maxim of an action in other respects right has rested solely on moral grounds and on the thought of one's duty" (G, 74).
20. See Herman (*op. cit.*) and Henson (*op. cit.*).
21. At several places, Henson (*op. cit.*) suggests that the strength of reverence for duty, or respect for duty, can vary. On p. 44, Henson writes "(1) Since (by hypothesis) reverence for duty was present and would have sufficed . . .," without suggesting that the last four words are redundant. See also case (α), p. 48. On the same page, we find: ". . . respect for duty was strong enough to ensure dutiful action . . ." Respect for duty and having a moral motive seem to be treated as if the same. For the suggestion that the moral motive comes in varying strength, see (3), p. 44.
22. Herman (*op. cit.*), pp. 369-71.
23. Herman considers the following objection to her account, that "even on this account of moral worth it remains a matter of luck or accident that an agent acted in a morally worthy way. The strength of competing inclinations, the presence of circumstances that evoke competition, the strength of the moral motive itself may be affected by chance" (*op. cit.*, 371). Herman's response is not to deny these points, but to claim that what they

establish is that “[t]he effect of chance . . . is on *who* is able to act in a morally worthy way” (*ibid.*). Herman does not disassociate her notion of acting out of duty from that of Henson but proposes an alternative model of moral worth, not a revised account of acting from duty. Like Henson, Herman is operating with a notion of a moral motive which admits of degrees.

24. Herman suggests a “greater-strength interpretation of sufficiency” (*op. cit.*, 368-9), according to which moral worth can be ascribed to an action only if it is performed from a moral motive which always succeeds on other occasions, whatever the counterinclinations. But only the virtuous person is in possession of such a motive. The greater-strength interpretation equates moral worth with moral virtue. For this reason, Herman rejects it. And so do I: as we have seen, the fitness report model attributes moral worth to persons who are not virtuous.

25. I am very grateful to Thomas E. Hill, Jr. for helpful discussions and valuable comments; and also to Dorit Bar-On, Barbara Herman, Christopher Morris, Christopher Sullivan, Carol Voeller, the members of the Triangle Ethics Group, and an anonymous referee.