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The Kantian Capacity for Moral Self-Control: Abstraction at Two Levels

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Abstract: As a rule, the Kantian capacity for self-control is interpreted as a kind of tool for compelling ourselves to act on the basis of the maxims we have adopted. To the extent that we merely acknowledge its role in following already-adopted maxims, however, we fail to capture the distinctive aspect of moral self-control identified by Kant. In this paper, I propose a fuller account of the Kantian capacity for moral self-control; I do so mainly by analyzing this capacity as our ability to “abstract from” various sensible impressions. This analysis shows that Kant’s conception of moral self-control involves two intimately related levels, which are subject to different criteria. Whereas the first level is connected to our ability to adopt moral maxims and requires that we abstract from all sensible impressions, the second is associated with our ability to follow these maxims and does not necessarily require this radical abstraction.

1 Introduction

The context in which Kant mentions the term “Selbstbeherrschung” (self-control) at the beginning of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* can easily lead to the conclusion that the capacity for self-control is not supposed to play a key role in his account of virtue.¹ Kant’s ambition in this passage is to distance his view from all previous positions by arguing that qualities such as self-control and moderation of affects and passions are mistakenly taken to be absolutely good (*G* 4: 394). At first glance, then, it may seem that Kant does not praise self-control

¹ References are to: *Kants gesammelte Schriften*. Ausgabe der Preussischen (later Deutschen) Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Georg Reimer, subsequently Walter de Gruyter, 1900–). Except where indicated otherwise, translations are based on the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992–).

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highly, because his point is that such qualities can have only instrumental value: they can promote the good will and make its work easier, but they can also have bad effects.

Kant's example of the cruel Roman dictator Sulla would seem to illustrate this point well: despite the moral incorrectness of his maxims, Sulla can be said to have self-control because he steadfastly follows his maxims (*A* 7: 293). When explained in this simple way, this example also depicts the predominant understanding of the Kantian capacity for self-control, according to which self-control is a kind of instrument for following already-adopted maxims. Even when closer attention is paid to self-control, its role in adopting morally correct maxims remains neglected in the secondary literature. For example, in Baxley 2010, Anne Margaret Baxley's thought-provoking book-length study of virtue and autocracy, she does not explain why autocracy, or self-control, is needed for the maxim adoption.²

In this paper, I propose a fuller account of Kant's take on the capacity for moral self-control by providing an explanation of how we compel ourselves to adopt moral maxims of virtue.³ To the extent that we merely acknowledge its

² Furthermore, in his treatment of self-control or self-mastery, Paul Guyer 2005, 144, seems to suggest that the cultivation of different techniques for self-mastery is only "the naturally available means" that we have to implement our maxims. Along these lines, Eric Entrican Wilson 2015, 256, argues that self-control or "self-command is proficiency of sticking to the results of self-legislation". Felicitas Munzel's claim in Munzel 1999, 14, 165, that virtue consists in self-control of the human process of thinking might be considered an exception, but the full development of the idea that self-control is necessary for adopting moral maxims lies outside the scope of her book.

³ By maxims of virtue or maxims of ends (*MM* 6: 480; 6: 395) I mean particular maxims on which we actually act. Generally, I side with the idea that maxims are arranged hierarchically – a model proposed, for example, by Christine Korsgaard 1989, 324, and Henry Allison 1990, 93. And presumably, like Allison 1990, 93, who explains the relationship between the different kinds of maxims in terms of "embeddedness", I do not believe that the idea that maxims come in different degrees of generality necessarily commits us to the view that a more specific maxim and a more general one, our fundamental maxim, must be understood as two completely separate maxims. On my view, it is through adopting our more specific moral maxims that we cultivate their deep motivating subjective ground, or our disposition (*Gesinnung*). See, for example, *R* 6: 21 f. Or, as Kant argues in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (e. g. 6: 387), by adopting our particular moral maxims we cultivate a virtuous disposition (*Tugendgesinnung*). As discussed elsewhere (Vujošević 2019, 45 f., 50), I believe that certain claims in the *Religion* (for example about radical changes of heart) commit us neither to a 'static' view of our disposition, according to which it is determined once and for all, nor to the idea that there is an insufficient degree of commensurability between his accounts in the *Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Religion*. One of my arguments is that Kant emphasizes that radical change of this sort, or reformation of our propensity to evil, is always *gradual* from our own perspective (*R* 6: 48) – because of our limited self-cognition, we can never know for sure whether such a change has occurred (e. g. *R* 6: 51).

role in following already-adopted maxims, we fail both to capture the distinctive aspect of moral self-control identified by Kant and to properly account for its relevance in explaining his notion of virtue. According to my reading, Kant's conception of moral self-control involves two intimately related but different levels: whereas one level is required for the adoption of maxims of virtue, the other is required for our being able to follow them.⁴

On this interpretation, Sulla's lack of virtue is primarily explained by his failure to compel himself to adopt moral maxims; as a result, he fails to compel himself to follow them. Although Sulla can be said to have self-control in the sense of managing to discipline himself to follow his immoral maxims, he actually lacks the two levels of *moral* self-control that are constitutive of virtue. From the moral point of view, Sulla can even be said to misuse his capacity for self-control by adopting morally incorrect maxims and adhering to them.⁵

A thorough analysis of Kant's notions of affect, passion and inner freedom, along with other terms which he uses to explain the phenomenon of moral self-control, such as autocracy, rule (*Herrschaft*), government (*Regierung*), self-composure and "free self-constraint", shows why we should not commit ourselves to the model of self-control initially suggested by the *Groundwork* passage. It shows that Kant does not understand moral self-control in the same way that his predecessors did, and that he therefore attempts to provide an alternative account.

To fully delineate Kant's conception of moral self-control, I first examine it through the lens of Kant's different uses of the term "autocracy" (*section 2*). In so doing, I make room for the claim that the capacity for self-control, in a certain sense, facilitates the adoption of moral maxims. To explain how continuous exercise of this capacity participates in the process of maxim adoption, I then analyze self-control as the capacity for abstraction (*section 3*). To my knowledge, this is the first such analysis. It is important because it shows that Kant's conception of moral self-control necessarily involves two closely related levels, which need not meet the same criteria.

⁴ This idea might be implicitly present in Peter König's distinction between *the autocracy of pure practical reason*, which he relates to the state of having morally correct maxims, and *the autocracy of empirically-conditioned practical reason*, which he mainly discusses by pointing out its close relationship to the principle of happiness and self-control regarding affects and passions (König 1994, 192, 198, 229). However, König aims neither to fully clarify the difference between the two levels of self-control nor to explain how self-control regarding affects and passions is involved in maxim adoption.

⁵ He is not only morally weak or one who merely lacks virtue; he is also vicious.

2 Self-Control as Autocracy

It is often thought that Kant viewed autocracy solely as the power to control inclinations (e. g. *LE 27*: 364).⁶ Indeed, he refers to this power precisely along these lines in a key passage on autocracy from the *Metaphysics of Morals*, where he appeals to the idea in order to pick out the distinctive character of duties of virtue:

What essentially distinguishes a duty of virtue from a duty of right is that external constraint to the latter kind of duty is morally possible, whereas the former is based only on free self-constraint [*dem freien Selbstzwange*]. – For finite *holy* beings (who could never be tempted to violate duty) there would be no doctrine of virtue but only a doctrine of morals, since the latter is autonomy of practical reason whereas the former is also *autocracy* of practical reason, that is, it involves consciousness of the *capacity* [*des Vermögens*] to master one's inclinations when they rebel against the law, a capacity which, though not directly perceived, is yet rightly inferred from the categorical imperative. (*MM 6*: 383)

In contrast to autonomy, which can also be attributed to fully rational beings, *autocracy* of practical reason is here presented as a specific quality of the human will that is required if one is to become virtuous.

In order to show that Kant's discussions of autocracy also suggest that self-control is crucial to the adoption of maxims of virtue, in the remainder of this section I discuss two alternative ways of explaining the difference between autocracy and autonomy. To outline the first interpretative possibility, I address Henry Allison's influential reading, according to which autonomy and autocracy constitute different aspects of the same power: the capacity and its actualization. An alternative reading of the distinction has been offered by Anne Margaret Baxley, who suggests that autocracy and autonomy are in fact two different capacities: as the executive power of the will, autocracy makes possible compliance with self-legislated principles; autonomy, the legislative power of the will, is tasked with issuing these principles.

2.1 Allison's Reading of the Autonomy-Autocracy Distinction

In Allison 1990, 164, he claims that autocracy is “actual strength of character or self-control”, whereas autonomy is “the mere capacity [*Vermögen*] for it”. The difference, as he puts it, is between “control” and “capacity” – autocracy is achieved

⁶ Additionally, he has been said to treat autocracy as the authority that our mind exercises not only over our inclinations but also over the faculties of the soul, such as imagination (*LE 27*: 364; 24: 1496–98).

by few, through a process of self-discipline, whereas autonomy of practical reason is possessed by all moral agents. In a nutshell: autocracy is the capacity for autonomy when it is realized. Virtue is a form of self-control that amounts to “an actual ability to act from duty” (Allison 1990, 246); as such, it is, or requires, autocracy. In Allison 1990, 164, he argues that virtue is a form of self-control that is based on a “principle of inner freedom”, and that self-control “is merely a necessary and not also a sufficient condition of virtue”.

On the basis of this interpretation, Kant’s example of Sulla, who steadfastly follows his morally impermissible maxims (*A* 7: 293), may be explained as follows: Sulla can be said to lack the form of self-control that characterizes virtue (because his self-control is not based on inner freedom) or he can be said to lack self-control (understood as a necessary condition of virtue). Yet it remains unclear how Sulla must use his capacity for self-control to compel himself to adopt moral maxims and how such self-constraining activity might relate to the principle of inner freedom.

Although I largely accept Allison’s explanatory framework,⁷ I still believe that these points deserve further clarification. Treating self-control as an already-actualized capacity alone does not seem to accommodate certain passages in which Kant refers to the mere capacity for self-control, and this treatment makes it hard to fully explain how self-control participates in the adoption of maxims of virtue.

Kant also describes autocracy as a capacity (*P* 20: 295; Cf. also *LE* 27: 1498). Additionally, in the fully quoted passage from the *Metaphysics of Morals* (6: 383), Kant argues that autocracy merely involves *consciousness* of the *capacity* to master our inclinations. Thus it is very likely that what he has in mind in this passage is not virtue as “an actual ability”, as Allison calls it, or actual strength of self-control, but rather the mere capacity for self-control. Kant seems to suggest that consciousness of the latter explains why we need a doctrine of virtue. If we are to explain how we, as sensible and intelligible beings, can fulfill the duties of virtue, we must take into account the mere capacity for self-control. As Kant argues:

⁷ I agree with his idea that autocracy and autonomy are not to be understood as two separate powers of the soul. This interpretation accommodates Kant’s claim that the autonomy of practical reason is simultaneously (or also) its autocracy (*MM* 6: 383; *P* 20: 295), and it finds support in certain notes taken by his students, which imply that autocracy is a kind of realized capacity (e.g. *LE* 29: 626).

It is also correct to say that the human being is under obligation *to virtue* (as moral strength). For while the capacity (*facultas*) to overcome all opposing sensible impulses can and must be simply *presupposed* in man on account of his freedom, yet this capacity as strength (*robur*) is something he must acquire. (*MM* 6: 397)

Kant therefore speaks of virtue as an actualized capacity or moral strength, but he also thinks that we must assume that we always have the capacity for virtue. Analogously, although there is no doubt that fulfilment of the duties of virtue requires exercise of the capacity for self-control, the doctrine of virtue does not presuppose autocracy as an actual strength of self-control.

If, unlike Allison, we pay closer attention to the mere capacity for self-control, we are better able to bring to light the particular role played by self-control before and during the process of maxim adoption. Kant's well-known example, in which a prince forces a man to choose between giving false testimony and being executed, is very helpful in this regard. Kant argues that this man "would perhaps not venture to assert whether he would" really choose to be executed or not, but that he "must admit without hesitation that it is possible for him" to overcome his love of life, that is, to control one of his strongest inclinations (*C2* 5: 30). Kant's view is that this man, like every other human being, is not directly conscious of his freedom (*C2* 5: 29). As soon as he begins to form his maxims, however, he becomes conscious not only of the moral law but also of his freedom to choose to do – or the fact that it is *possible* for him to choose to do – what the moral law demands.⁸ Consciousness of his freedom of choice, then, seems to require the mere capacity for self-control, and the man in the example achieves this consciousness without already having compelled himself to adopt a specific maxim in the circumstances.

Near the end of the second *Critique*, Kant describes how we become aware of our freedom to put the influence of all sensible impressions aside – that is, how we become aware that we can do what the moral law demands of us. To do so is, as Kant illustrates, "as it were, to raise oneself altogether above the sensible world, and this consciousness of the law also as an incentive is inseparably combined with consciousness of a power of *ruling over sensibility* [*die Sinnlichkeit beherrschenden Vermögens*], even if not always with effect" (*C2* 5: 159). This quotation again supports the notion that, on Kant's view, the capacity to overcome sensible impulses can be attributed to our will independently of whether it has been actualized. Consequently, it confirms that the mere capacity for self-control

⁸ In interpreting this example, Allison also states that "this consciousness is of a mere possibility rather than an actual capacity" (Allison 2002, 246) and goes on to mention "the lack of autocracy" in this context, understood as "the recognition of failure to live up to the moral requirement". This is puzzling, however, since there seems to be no such failure in this example.

is at play in the above example. Kant's description suggests that he maintains that consciousness of the capacity for self-control, even if not yet realized, plays a crucial role in our becoming aware that we can distance ourselves from the sensible side of our nature, or that the moral law can be an incentive that really moves us to perform an action.

By becoming aware that we have the capacity for self-control, we become aware that we *can* do what we *ought* to do. That is, we become aware that we are capable of producing certain objects via our choices (*MM* 6: 213; *A* 7: 251). It is then presupposed that all of us have the mere capacity for self-control, simply because ought implies can. This seems to be why Kant implies that autocracy is consciousness of the mere capacity for self-control, which is "rightly inferred from the moral categorical imperative" (*MM* 6: 383) and which "can and must be simply *presupposed* in man on account of his freedom" (*MM* 6: 397).

Hence, it is not fully accurate to claim that we only have self-control in the moments in which we can be said to have acquired moral strength (via the proper exercise of the capacity for self-control), for it must also be presupposed that we always have the mere capacity for self-control, which is also required if we are to adopt maxims of virtue.⁹

2.2 Baxley's Reading of the Autonomy-Autocracy Distinction in the Light of a New Interpretation

Baxley 2003, 17 f., finds Allison's reading of the autonomy-autocracy distinction unsatisfying for other reasons: she argues that it incorrectly "equates autonomy with a capacity for self-control" and that it "fails to capture the legislative-executive thrust of the distinction". On her account, autocracy, as a form of self-control which "arms us with moral strength to execute self-legislated principles", is central to virtue (Baxley 2010, 83). As the *executive* power of the will, autocracy is thus needed to comply with the norms prescribed by the *legislative* power of the will, which, as Baxley adds, involves the notion of self-determination (Baxley 2015, 229; 2003, 18).

⁹ In Allison's framework, this mere capacity for self-control may be labelled autonomy, or perhaps a capacity for autocracy. However, it seems to me that the first option still leaves us with the question of why autocracy, as the specific quality of the *human* will, is needed for us to adopt moral maxims. And the second option seems to jeopardize the very distinction that Allison draws between autonomy and autocracy, for autocracy, as an "actual strength" of self-control, is to be distinguished from autonomy precisely because it is the actualization of our capacity for autonomy.

The idea that autonomy and autocracy should be seen as two separate powers is particularly evident in her explanation of weakness of the will as a case in which the will is autonomous but has failed to achieve autocracy – the case in which one succumbs to temptation just by *acting* immorally (Baxley 2010, 60, 81). Relatedly, in Baxley 2003, 15 f., she claims that autonomy concerns “motivational independence”, whereas autocracy concerns “temptation independence”.

According to this account, then, Sulla’s lack of virtue is not explainable in terms of a lack of self-control – he exercises his capacity for self-control, but he somehow, independently of his executive power of self-control, misuses his legislative power. Unlike Baxley’s weak-willed person who fails to attain “temptation independence”, Sulla merely seems to have a problem with achieving “motivational independence”.

Baxley’s interpretation seems to rest on a one-sided understanding of Kant’s notion of *temptation*, according to which we are merely tempted not to *observe* our maxims. In the fully quoted passage from the *Metaphysics of Morals* (6: 383), temptation is identified as that which explains why human beings need autocracy. Since we, as sensible beings, fall into temptation to transgress duty, if it is to apply to us, the doctrine of morals (autonomy of practical reason) must at the same time be a doctrine of virtue, i. e. “also *autocracy* of practical reason”. And Kant does suggest that holy beings would do gladly what the moral law sets out as right (*MM* 6: 405) – unlike us, they need not compel themselves to act morally. But Kant also points out that purely rational beings are incapable of morally unacceptable maxims.¹⁰ He even argues that notions such as “maxim”, “interest” and “incentive” cannot “be applied to the divine will” (*C2* 5: 79). These notions must be employed, however, if we are to account for the way in which we fulfil the duties of virtue, and the capacity for self-control must be the cornerstone of this account. Since the moral law is always an imperative for us, and therefore not immediately “subjectively necessitating” for us (*LM* 28: 258), we must compel ourselves to adopt moral maxims and to become morally motivated in this way. Given Kant’s overall emphasis on the maxims of actions and his discussions of maxims of virtue, we may conclude that the doctrine of virtue is needed in our case primarily because we are tempted to adopt morally impermissible maxims.

Consequently, autonomy does not seem to involve a kind of “motivational independence” distinct from “temptation independence”. As will become clear, autocracy actually concerns moral motivation, which is essential to Kant’s conception of virtue.

¹⁰ See for example *C2* 5: 32 and *G* 4: 439.

Baxley's interpretation is in line with the Collins (1784–5) notes, according to which autocracy is an executive power of the mind or an authority that “involves mastery over oneself, and not merely the power to direct” (*LE* 27: 362f.). This executive authority “can compel us, in spite of all impediments, to produce certain effects”, and it is said to be the same as *moral feeling* (*LE* 27: 361f.). There is also a related discussion about the distinction between the principle of appraisal of obligation and the principle of its performance or execution (*LE* 27: 274f.). Moral feeling, as our motive for carrying out obligation, should thus not be confused with the objective principle of judgment (*LE* 27: 275).¹¹ These passages can indeed be taken to suggest that autocracy, as an executive power, is only needed to remove obstacles once we are tempted to fail to act in accordance with our previously made decisions. Compelling ourselves “to produce certain effects” in spite of all sensible obstacles would then have to be understood in terms of compelling ourselves to perform certain actions, or as disciplining ourselves to obey certain rules. If conceived in this way, the capacity for self-control may seem completely different from “the power to direct”, which, as a forerunner of autonomy, is meant to provide us with norms.

But this interpretation is not in keeping with certain points from the Mrongovius lecture (1785) notes, particularly because they jeopardize the claim that we are to draw a sharp distinction between autocracy and autonomy by claiming that the latter involves *self-determination*. Consider, for example, the following point: “The autocracy of reason, to determine the will in accordance with moral laws, would then be moral feeling.” (*LE* 29: 626) Autocracy is here again identified with moral feeling, but it is also suggested that it necessarily involves self-determination rather than simply presupposing it. When reason determines the will through the moral law by attending to its own interest, we are then also motivated to do what the law requires of us (*LE* 29: 626). This is how reason gains the motivational force of an incentive, and this self-determination of our reason is here called autocracy.¹²

The intimate relationship between moral feeling that, according to the lecture notes, is equivalent to autocracy or the executive power, and the notion of self-determination, which on Baxley's view belongs only to the legislative power, comes

¹¹ The underlying idea is that we should distinguish between these two principles if we are to avoid the grave mistake of putting forward a pathological principle as the supreme principle of morality.

¹² Together with other Kant's claims, this claim suggests that compelling ourselves “to produce certain effects” cannot be understood simply as controlling ourselves to perform certain actions: it must involve a kind of incorporation of the moral incentive through the process of maxim adoption.

to the foreground in Kant's doctrine of virtue. On the reading I shall now propose, in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant makes clear that moral feeling is required for self-determination and that an incentive must be involved in lawgiving. Both points challenge the interpretation according to which autocracy or self-control is needed only at the level of following maxims we have already adopted.

Kant argues that *every determination of choice* proceeds from the representation of a *possible action* through moral feeling and adds that this distinctive kind of feeling of pleasure or displeasure makes possible the determination of our choice by the moral law as the state in which we "take an interest in the action" (*MM* 6: 399). Moral feeling presupposes awareness of the moral law, and it is stimulated by an awareness that our actions are consistent with or contrary to its requirements (*MM* 6: 399 f.). The actual determination of our choice by the moral law depends on it.

Kant relatedly explains that moral laws, which are imperatives for us, command morally necessary actions, for which then

arises the concept of a duty, observance or transgression of which is indeed connected with a pleasure or displeasure of a distinctive kind (moral *feeling*), although in practical laws of reason we take no account of these feelings (since they have nothing to do with the *basis* of practical laws but only with the subjective *effect* in the mind during the determination of our choice [*bei der Bestimmung unserer Willkür*]).
(*MM* 6: 221; translation modified)

First, this quotation confirms the thesis that moral feeling, which is said to be related to *possible* actions (*MM* 6: 399), is necessary for the determination of choice by practical laws. Second, it suggests that we need moral feeling if we are to acquire our own concepts of duty. Unlike holy beings, we need our own concepts of duty, i. e. concepts "of a necessitation (constraint) of free choice [*Willkür*] through the law" (*MM* 6: 379), which should not be identified with mere awareness of the moral law (e. g. *MM* 6: 389).¹³ Third, it tells us that moral feeling is not to be conceived as the *objective* condition of morality or the cognitive basis of practical laws. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant still holds that objective principles, which would serve us as the practical principles if our reason had "complete control over" desire, cannot be based on any kind of feeling.¹⁴

Unlike Baxley's reading, however, the above interpretation does not exclude the possibility that moral feeling is a necessary element in the process of adopting

¹³ In another article (Vujošević 2014), I explain why I think that moral feeling and conscience, as the *subjective* conditions of our receptivity to the concepts of duty, are required if we are to apply the moral law to ourselves by adopting morally correct maxims.

¹⁴ See *G* 4: 401n and *MM* 6: 376 f.

maxims of virtue moral feeling might still be essential when it comes to the adoption of *subjective* principles of volition through which we *can* determine our choice independently of external influences. As I shall elaborate, moral feeling and self-control, the latter of which is needed if we are to free ourselves from the influences of sensible impressions on our minds, are required for the adoption of moral rules that we make for ourselves on subjective grounds.¹⁵

Finally, Kant is arguing that an incentive is necessarily involved in moral legislation, although to some extent he maintains the old distinction between the principle of appraisal of obligation and the principle of its execution, now in the form of a distinction between *a law*, which “makes an action a duty” by representing it as “*objectively necessary*”, and *an incentive*, “which connects a ground for determining choice to this action *subjectively* with the representation of the law” (*MM* 6: 218).¹⁶ Importantly, he now adds that all *lawgiving* (*Gesetzgebung*) must include these *two elements* (*MM* 6: 218).¹⁷ A law, as the first element, is tantamount to “a merely theoretical cognition of a possible determination of choice”, whereas an incentive, as the second element, must also be present if we really are to determine our choice (*MM* 6: 218). An incentive must be included in lawgiving if we are to become motivated to perform an action; without a subjective ground for determining our choices, moral laws would be “objectively necessitating” for us but not “also at the same time subjectively necessitating” (*LM* 28: 258). We would have a kind of theoretical knowledge of what we generally ought to do, but this would have no bearing on how we make decisions about how to act in everyday life. We would not properly *will* what we *ought* to do.

This analysis is of particular importance to explaining the *internal lawgiving* that is constitutive of *virtue*. Unlike juridical or external lawgiving, internal lawgiving does not permit inclinations and aversions to function as determining grounds of choice. Instead, it makes “an action a duty and also makes this duty an incentive” (*MM* 6: 219). If we are to become morally motivated to perform an action, we must adopt a maxim of virtue by which the moral law also becomes the incentive that actually motivates us to act (*MM* 6: 480).

Baxley’s interpretation, according to which self-control is needed merely for acting in accordance with our maxims once we have adopted them, does not adequately explain why self-control is central to virtue because it does not spell out how we actually determine our choices though adopting maxims of virtue.

¹⁵ See *MM* 6: 225.

¹⁶ To a certain degree, this is in keeping with the old idea that moral laws without incentives are grounds of appraisal but not execution – as such, they are objective but not at the same time “subjectively practical” (*LM* 28: 317).

¹⁷ See *G* 4: 431.

The analysis provided thus far suggests that autocracy or self-control, which, according to the lecture notes, Kant identifies with moral feeling, is also a necessary component in the adoption of maxims of virtue. Autocracy, as an executive power, is not simply necessary for the cultivation of certain feelings following the adoption of maxims, and it entails more than merely compelling ourselves to follow rules by repeating actions with the aim of rooting out our general tendency to disobey (*CI* A709 f./B737 f.; *LE* 27: 361).

It is, however, not yet clear *how* the proper exercise of our capacity for self-control enables the adoption of maxims of virtue. To clarify this, we must turn to Kant's discussions of inner freedom as the condition of becoming virtuous and its intimate connection to the capacity for self-control. The best way to accomplish this, as I shall demonstrate, is by approaching self-control from another angle.

3 Self-Control as Abstraction

In this section, I examine self-control as the ability to *abstract from* various sensible impressions: first in the sense of preventing affects, then in the sense of preventing passions, and lastly in terms of abstracting from all inclinations and feelings on which inclinations are based.¹⁸ My main aim is to show that *inner freedom*, as the constitutive basis of virtue, at least presupposes the proper exercise of our capacity for self-control, which is required for the adoption of maxims of virtue.

It might at first seem that there is no room for abstraction in Kant's moral theory because he maintains that the concepts of duty do not originate from the same source as empirical concepts.¹⁹ This may bring into question the role of abstraction in the genesis of these concepts, but only when abstraction is understood as a kind of induction. However, Kant thought that the acquisition of these pure concepts also requires abstraction; they *abstract from* what is sensitive, but they are not themselves "abstracted from everything sensitive" (*ID* 2: 395).²⁰ Phil-

18 By interpreting self-control as abstraction, I do not intend to argue that self-control should be reduced to abstraction. My claim is rather that abstraction is constitutive of self-control on Kant's conception of it.

19 As Kant notes, moral concepts are cognized "by the pure understanding itself" (*ID* 2: 395). See also *MM* 6: 383.

20 This does not imply that Kant thought that abstraction is all that is needed in order for our discursive understanding to acquire the concepts of duty. He generally holds that the formation of concepts also requires other cognitive activities of the understanding, namely comparison and reflection. Accordingly, my claim is not that abstraction is all that is needed when we prescribe ourselves maxims.

osophers, then, “abstract (isolate) *from something*” (A 7: 131); they do not generate moral concepts by abstracting them from the input of sensibility but rather abstract from the representations that are based on various sensible impressions by *setting* these representations *aside*. Unlike a chemist, who literally isolates one substance from another, an agent reasoning about moral issues decides to *disregard* or not to take into account such representations, without being able to banish them from his mind. This is the sense of abstraction that I have in mind here, and its employment, as will be shown, demystifies the meaning of the term “pure” in Kant’s moral philosophy.

Kant has been reported as saying: “Voluntary abstraction and attention constitutes the principle of self-control [*Selbstbeherrschung*]” (LA 25: 1239). Showing that this idea is indeed present in Kant’s works requires at the very least a brief clarification of the relationship between *abstraction* and *attention*. In his students’ notes, we also find the following statements: “the same attention is present in abstraction, only the objects are different” (LA 25: 1239); attention does “not stop with abstraction”; and abstraction “is the actualization of attention” (LM 29: 878). Similarly, in his *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy* (2: 190), Kant concludes that abstraction can be called “*negative attention*” because it is an effort to cancel “certain clear representations” for the purposes of ensuring that what remains becomes “much more clearly represented”. Abstraction therefore seems to entail an *effort* to disregard certain representations in order to pay better attention to others.

In his published *Anthropology*, Kant treats abstraction and attention as different ways of becoming conscious of certain representations and argues that abstraction is neither mere paying attention to some representations nor a lack of attentiveness:

The endeavor to become conscious of one’s representations is either the *paying attention to (attentio)* or the *turning away from* an idea of which I am conscious (*abstractio*). – The latter is not the mere failure and the omission of the former (for that would be distraction, *distractio*), but rather a real act of the cognitive faculty of stopping a representation of which I am conscious from being in connection with other representations in one consciousness. (A 7: 131)

When abstracting, we thus try to pay attention to some of our representations by turning attention away from others. As Kant argues, the faculty of abstraction is:

[a] far greater faculty than that of paying attention to a representation, because it demonstrates the freedom of the faculty of thought and the authority of the mind, in having the state [*Zustand*] of one’s representations under one’s control (*animus sui compos*). (A 7: 131; translation modified)

It is because of the power of abstraction that we can ignore the representations of the sensible objects we encounter. As Kant specifies, we actually abstract from “a determination of the object” of our representation (A 7: 131; translation modified). Hence, we abstract from the determinations that sensible objects impose on us by modifying the status of our representations of those objects in our consciousness. Put differently, we gain *control* over the *state* of some representations in our minds by setting aside the influence of sensible impressions on our minds.

This explanation shows that abstraction can be said to involve attention, but not the attention that we naturally pay to sensible objects. Our use of abstraction makes us capable of reasoning as if sensible impressions that we receive from objects did not exist in our minds. Abstraction is actually the cognitive activity of preventing the influence of various sensible objects on our consciousness with the aim of paying fuller attention to the representations that remain.²¹ It is a *real cognitive act* through which we break the relation between some representations in our minds with the aim of focusing our attention on something else by preventing sensible influences that are, as it were, incorporated in certain representations. This is why Kant suggests that it should not be understood simply as distraction (A 7: 131). I call this abstraction in the narrow sense, because Kant sometimes also treats distraction as a kind of abstraction (A 7: 206). To explain this and to outline an elementary level at which self-control functions, I first turn to Kant’s discussions of distraction.

3.1 Voluntary Distraction: The Rudimentary Level of Self-Control

Kant writes that *distraction* (*Zerstreuung*) is “the state of diverting attention (*abstractio*) away from certain ruling representations [*Vorstellungen*] by dispersing it among other, dissimilar ones” (A 7: 206; translation modified). Hence, distraction can be regarded as a rudimentary kind of abstraction, but not as abstraction in the narrow sense. Given that Kant also says that distraction can be either voluntary or involuntary (A 7: 206), it would be wrong to explain this difference by claiming that distraction is not a real cognitive act because it is involuntary. What Kant means by involuntary distraction is absent-mindedness, but for our purposes it is more important to determine what he means by *voluntary distraction* or *dissipation* (A 7: 206). This involves intentionally taking our minds off some things, whereby, as Kant explains, we create a diversion from our “involuntary

²¹ See, for example, LA 25: 1239.

reproductive power of imagination” (A 7: 207). This happens, for instance, when we try to get “rid of the object” that makes us feel sad (LA 25: 1240) by diverting attention from the representations that our recalcitrant power of imagination continuously reproduces (by associating different sensible impressions). In this case, we try to make certain representations disappear by “dispersing” attention to other objects – for instance, by occupying ourselves “fleetingly with diverse objects in society” (LA 25: 1240). This description does not adequately capture abstraction in the narrow sense. Accordingly, these two levels of self-control are meant to fulfill different functions.

Kant held that being capable of being voluntarily *distracted* is a precondition of *mental health* (A 7: 207). He often addresses hypochondria as an example of mental illness and argues that hypochondriacs are fantasists who cannot be talked out of their imaginings (A 7: 212). Hypochondriacs cannot refrain from regarding certain physical sensations as symptoms of an alleged illness. Their imagination misinterprets sensations as the symptoms of disease. They cannot control their power of imagination and restrain its play when they wish, such that imagination (as a quasi-mechanical activity) turns into mere fantasy.²² This is why Kant writes that hypochondriacs have a diseased imagination (*Einbildungskrankheit*) (A 7: 213). But Kant also adds that in the case of hypochondria “the patient is aware that something is not going right with the course of his thoughts, insofar as his reason has insufficient control over itself, to direct, stop or impel the course of his thoughts” (A 7: 202), and he argues that hypochondria is the opposite of the mind’s power to *master* ill feelings (C 7: 103). Because *reason* cannot *control itself* in this case, hypochondriacs cannot distract *voluntarily* from the chimerical representations that the reproductive power of the imagination unrestrainedly produces, and, consequently, they cannot free themselves from the ill feelings elicited by the figments of their imagination. Since hypochondriacs cling to certain representations so strongly that they cannot let them go, they can be said to be *involuntarily* distracted – that is, they are in an unhealthy state in which they lack self-control (LA 25: 1240). Although their condition is not as severe as madness, where “fantasy plays completely with the human being and the unfortunate victim has no control at all over the course of his representations” (A 7: 181), hypochondriacs cannot freely use their capacities for reason, imagination, and feeling. This destroys the balance of the soul necessary for mental health.

However, we need the capacity for abstraction in its elementary form not only because it is a prerequisite of mental health but also because it makes us capable of employing our powers for other purposes, such as achieving moral ends. A

²² See C 7: 106.

certain degree of control over our powers, through which we gain authority over the course of our sensible representations, is also a precondition for exercising self-control on a higher level that is more obviously required for the fulfillment of our moral obligations – the level of self-control that is needed if we are to be free of affects and passions. There is a parallel here: Kant states that being subjected to affects and passions is “probably always an illness of the mind” (*A* 7: 251) and describes moral strength of soul as a state of health in moral life (*MM* 6: 409; 6: 384).²³ As with mental health, Kant here seems to have in mind the balance of the soul that comes with having control over *all* its powers. Self-control is therefore not simply about ensuring that our rational faculties control our sensible ones but also about *reason’s controlling itself*.

3.2 Abstraction in the Narrow Sense and its Multiple Functions

As we have seen, abstraction in the narrow sense is the cognitive activity of disregarding our initial representations of objects; it diverts our attention, but not through its dispersion. It has a different aim. We can lessen the impact of sensible impressions on our minds by putting them aside; our choice can be determined independently of what stimulates our senses because we have the “capacity [*Vermögen*] to overcome impressions on our sensory faculty of desire” (*C1* A801/B829). The more control we have over the states of our representations (in the sense that we disregard determinations of their objects and ignore their influence), the more obvious it becomes that our choice is free. As Vigilantius’s (27: 626) explanatory note on what is called *animus sui compos* tells us, the state of a settled mind (*ein gefaßtes Gemüth*) – a mind in which one’s powers and capacities are subjected to free choice and employed accordingly – is the opposite of the state in which the necessitation of natural impulses rules. Through the capacity for abstraction or self-control, we thus overrule natural necessity by preventing sensible objects from determining our choices. To fully indicate how this can be translated into the moral domain, I take as my starting point Kant’s claim about the two requirements of inner freedom (*MM* 6: 407).²⁴

²³ For a different interpretation according to which affects and passion are forms of “mental illness”, see Patrick Frierson (2014, 215).

²⁴ For a contrasting account according to which these two requirements represent two completely different capacities, see Goy 2013, 184 f.; 203).

3.2.1 *Self-control as Preventing Affects*

Inner freedom necessarily involves taming (*zähmen*) one's *affects*, or "being one's own master [*Meister*] in a given case (*animus sui compos*)" (*MM* 6: 407). According to Kant, we have a duty to ensure that we are free of affects (*A* 7: 253; *MM* 6: 408) and our minds are capable of governing them (*A* 7: 253). He does not seem to believe, however, that we can control our affects once we find ourselves in an affective state. As Lara Denis points out in Denis 2000, 65, Kant could not reasonably advocate moderating affects since they are not under our control. Kant's other texts do make clear that he does not have the moderation of affects in mind, but even so, we must still explain what the governance of affects is meant to involve. Put differently, the question is what precisely self-control at this level involves. To determine this, we must first become clearer on what Kant means when he speaks of "affects".

Kant emphasizes that affects should be distinguished from passions, and all other inclinations, because they are strong *feelings* of pleasure and displeasure, not desires.²⁵ Not every intense feeling is an affect, however. For example, the ill feelings that Kant ascribes to hypochondriacs may be strong, but they are usually long-lasting emotional states. As Kant explains, an affect is a "surprise through sensation [*Überraschung durch Empfindung*]". These brief affective episodes happen to us suddenly and cause us to lose our composure (*animus sui compos*) (*A* 7: 252); they *temporarily* reduce us to an unhealthy state in which we can no longer freely use our powers, i. e. a state in which we do not possess ourselves or determine our actions by way of free choice (*LE* 27: 626). More precisely, an affect is a kind of strong feeling that renders the mind "incapable of engaging in free consideration [*Überlegung*] of principles [*Grundsätze*], in order to determine itself in accordance with them" (*C3* 5: 272). In an affective state one is incapable of calm reflection – one can neither form maxims nor determine one's choices in this way.²⁶

Kant thought that we can avoid descending into these states. For example, he argues that it is unwise to intentionally allow affects to come into being because they are *imprudent* (*A* 7: 253). This is illustrated in Kant's example of a rich person whose servant breaks his "beautiful and rare crystal goblet" (*A* 7: 254). If the rich man were to make a quick "calculation in thought" and compare the pain he feels as a reaction to the accident to all the pleasures he enjoys as a rich man, he would

²⁵ See for example *A* 7: 235.

²⁶ Kant usually argues that affects make reflection impossible, but he also, at least at one point, suggests that they only make reflection more difficult (*MM* 6: 407).

not feel that his entire happiness was lost at that moment and would not descend into the affective state of anger. Hence, before being gripped by this specific kind of feeling we can choose not to let ourselves become a plaything of our affects by entering into a state in which we are no longer capable of comparing one feeling against the sum of other feelings.

Another example makes it obvious that being free of affects is important from the *moral* point of view. When referring to the Stoic principle of *apathy*, Kant explains that the wise man must not even be in a state of affect of compassion (*Mitleid*) as a reaction to the misfortune of his best friend (A 7: 253).²⁷ Since Kant thought that the Stoic sage is an ideal that we should use as a standard for judging our actions and improving ourselves, we can translate this claim into what is attainable at the human level.²⁸ Sympathetic sadness as an affect makes us momentarily incapable of using the powers necessary to help our friend, but Kant's point here seems to be, even more, that we in any case have a duty to ensure that we are free of affects because they preclude reflection and cause us to act involuntarily. The affect of compassion renders us momentarily incapable of the free use of our power of reflection, which is necessary for adopting moral maxims.

Importantly, Kant's claim here is not that we ought to rid ourselves of all compassionate feelings – he also holds that we have an indirect duty to *cultivate* our natural compassionate feelings in order to use them as *means* for active and rational benevolence, which is based on moral principles (*MM* 6: 457). Hence, by not allowing our feelings to turn into affects, we not only facilitate the adoption of moral maxims but also improve their effectiveness in practice by making their observance easier. Some people have, as Kant says, “a natural gift of apathy” (A 7: 254), and others ought to bring themselves to an “affectless” state.²⁹ Since we

²⁷ He first says that this is “an entirely correct and sublime principle of the Stoic school” and then adds: “– Nevertheless, the wisdom of nature has planted into us the predisposition to it [*die Anlage dazu*] in order to handle the reins *provisionally*, until reason has achieved the necessary strength” (A 7: 253, translation modified). Some may object that Kant is therefore not claiming here that we have a duty to ensure that we are free of affects. I would not agree, because Kant seems to have in mind here the predisposition to feelings of compassion which need not necessarily become affects. Furthermore, he still seems to suggest that we have a duty to achieve strength by developing our capacity for self-control.

²⁸ See for example *C1* A569/B597.

²⁹ Even though Kant usually describes apathy as the absence of affective feelings (e. g. A 7: 253; *C3* 5: 272), he implies that the duty of apathy also covers being free of passionate desires (*MM* 6: 408). Some Kant scholars, such as Lara Denis (in Denis 2000), do not attach much weight to the latter, whereas others, such as Paul Formosa (in Formosa 2011), emphasize that the duty of apathy also includes being free of passions. I do not believe we should charge Kant with incon-

cannot control our affects when we are already in an affective state, we ought to cultivate natural feelings by taking care that they do not become affects.

We must turn to the faculty of *abstraction* in order to explain how we fulfill *the duty of apathy*. By abstracting from sensible representations, we disable the influence of various sensible impressions that would otherwise bring us out of the calm state of mind in which we can freely employ our powers. Moreover, without our capacity for abstraction we would not be able to escape the strong impact that the surprise we experience through sensation has on our way of thinking and acting.

Abstraction plays a crucial role in both examples. As to the prudential perspective, which is accentuated in the first example, Kant suggests that a well-developed faculty of abstraction leads to happiness (A 7: 131).³⁰ As he explains: the faculty of *abstraction* is “a strength of mind that can only be acquired through practice” (A 7: 132). In all likelihood, the rich man will not have done his best to develop this faculty or to acquire this kind of strength. If the rich man were to abstract from the representation of his broken crystal goblet or to have control over the condition of representations in his mind, he would not feel as though his whole happiness were lost. In this case, self-control is in accordance with the rules of *prudence* (LE 27: 362).³¹

Its *moral* analogue comes to the foreground in the second example. It becomes clear that we have a duty to acquire inner freedom by being free of affects – this makes the fulfilment of duties of virtue possible. At this level, self-control is meant to serve as a necessary condition for *adopting* maxims because affects bring us out of the state in which cool reflection is possible. But, affects also make us incapable of controlling our actions, and self-control at this level is also required if we are to *follow* our moral maxims. To be virtuous – that is, to have moral maxims and to act accordingly – we ought to avoid descending into affective states by disregarding various sensible impressions that we continuously receive.

sistency on this matter, especially because of the intimate relationship between empirical desires and feelings that I outline in what follows.

³⁰ See also LA 25: 1240.

³¹ Hence, Kant's view is not that we can use our capacity for abstraction only for moral purposes but rather that, when we exercise this capacity in accordance with the categorical imperative in order to properly incorporate the moral law into our maxims, our use of it is to be called moral.

3.2.2 Self-Control as Preventing Passions

Kant also argues that inner freedom requires that one *rules oneself* (*über sich selbst Herr zu sein*) or controls (*beherrschen*) one's own *passions* (*MM* 6: 407). The terms “Selbstbeherrschung” and “Herrschaft” better correspond to this stage of self-control. The Latin equivalent that Kant uses to describe it is *imperium in semetipsum*. Kant chooses *imperium* here rather than the traditional *dominium* because he wishes to point out that we do not and should not own ourselves in the same way that we own things (*LE* 27: 625; 27: 627; *MM* 6: 270).³² His point is that self-control instead involves the *free command* of our own faculties: it is better understood as “the faculty for freely disposing over the free use of all one's powers” (*LM* 28: 589 f.).³³ Passionate states indicate that we have failed to use this power properly, or that we have failed to realize our capacity for inner freedom, which makes the fulfilment of the duties of virtue possible.³⁴

To explain how we can deal with passions and become virtuous, we must first have a clear idea of what passions are. First of all, a passion is not a feeling on Kant's view. It is not a brief affective episode, such as anger. Yet a passion, such as hatred, is a kind of *desire* that is inseparably connected with feelings (*MM* 4: 608). As sensible desires, passions are necessarily preceded by and based on feelings.³⁵ Like all other inclinations, they are deeply rooted sensible desires that have become a kind of rule for us (*A* 7: 265). Kant writes that a passion “is a sensible desire that has become a lasting inclination” (*MM* 4: 608). Even though passions are *habitual* sensible desires, however, not every inclination is a passionate one.³⁶

Most of the time, Kant discusses acquired passions or the passions that we make habitual through setting ourselves certain rules (*A* 7: 267 f.).³⁷ This may be taken to imply that these passions are not habitual in the sense in which other non-passionate inclinations are because we have made them a lasting rule. When we judge that a connection between pleasure and the desire that is caused by this feeling holds as a general *rule* for ourselves, then we, as Kant explains, have

³² If this were the case we would, for example, have the right to kill ourselves when life became too hard for us, but Kant finds this morally impermissible.

³³ Autocracy is described in similar terms in the Collins notes (27: 364).

³⁴ I draw here on Stephen Engstrom's point (in Engstrom 2002, 304 f.) that Kant speaks of inner freedom in two closely related senses: inner freedom as a capacity, and inner freedom as the same capacity “insofar as it is also strength”, or “the realization of the capacity”.

³⁵ See, for example, *MM* 6: 211–214.

³⁶ See, for example, *A* 7: 251, *R* 6: 29 and *MM* 6: 212.

³⁷ In Kant's view, there are also “passions of natural (innate) inclinations”, which are connected with affect (*A* 7: 267 f.).

“an interest of inclination” (MM 6: 212). However, this may also hold for certain non-passionate inclinations – we then sometimes also make a connection between our feeling of pleasure and the desire that is based upon it a general rule for ourselves. Like all other sensible desires, non-passionate inclinations are also dependent on sensation (*Empfindung*); what interests us and determines our desire in this case can only be an *object* insofar as it is agreeable to us.

Revealingly, Kant points out that passions are insatiable and that a passion therefore contains “a *constant* principle with respect to its object” (A 7: 266): passionate desires are never fully satisfied. Additionally, on Kant’s view, passions presuppose a maxim established for the *end* prescribed by an inclination (A 7: 266) and aim merely at the possession of the *means* of satisfying all inclinations that are directly concerned with that end (A 7: 270). Here, we make it a general rule that our desire will be *persistently* dependent on a certain object because of one of our natural inclinations – that is, we make it a rule for ourselves that we will be constantly interested in the end that is determined by one of our inclinations. By making it a rule for ourselves to act only in ways that can lead us to realizing this end, we become enslaved by our arising passion. And we become strongly motivated to use all possible means to follow this rule.

In this way, we intensify a natural inclination, which then turns into a passion or becomes so powerful that it can be “conquered only with difficulty or not at all” by reason (A 7: 251).³⁸ This is how we put ourselves in a passionate state in which we are no longer able to compare that inclination with the sum of all other inclinations when we are to make a certain choice (A 7: 265). Take, for

38 In this passage, as in other passages (e. g. C3 5: 272n and A 7: 266), Kant seems to leave open whether it is simply very difficult or impossible to free ourselves of passions once we have them. He might also mean that it is sometimes possible for us and sometimes not (perhaps depending on one’s character and the intensity of one’s passions). However, if Kant’s claim is that it is sometimes impossible for us to free ourselves of the passions that we already have, then there arises the problem of how we can be held responsible for our decisions and actions in these cases: we have the capacity for self-control, which we *ought* to exercise to free ourselves of passions, but we *cannot* make use of it for these purposes. So, even though we still have the capacity for self-control and we can be held responsible for any prior misuse that brings us into a passionate state, the question is whether we should be blamed for not properly exercising this capacity in those moments when we are dominated by our passions. Since *ought* does not seem to imply *can* in these cases, it may seem that we do not have a duty to further develop our capacity for self-control, or the duty to acquire virtue as moral strength. My hunch is that a possible solution to this problem might be based on the idea that we cannot know in advance whether it is possible for us to free ourselves of certain passions, which means that we are not released from the duty to attempt to do so. Analogously, Kant claims that we have a duty to cognize ourselves and doubts the credibility of self-knowledge at the same time, but this, as I see it, does not prevent us from claiming that we ought to do our best to cognize ourselves.

example, the case of a person with a passion for avarice who gives such a high priority to her desire to earn money in order to acquire influence over others that she becomes blind to all other desires she naturally has, such as her desire to be loved by others.³⁹ To the extent that she is in this kind of passionate state, she has adopted the end of dominating other people and has based one of her maxims on that end. This way of basing maxims on empirical ends is, on Kant's view, not only morally unacceptable but also prudentially inappropriate. Finally, not all morally impermissible maxims seem to lead to a passionate state. For example, Kant's famous maxim of falsely promising to pay back money in order to get oneself out of trouble (*G* 4: 422) need not presuppose a readiness to employ *all* possible means to reach the end of obtaining money.

Having passions is morally reprehensible (*A* 7: 267) not simply because of the maxims they presuppose but also because having passions generally makes the *adoption* of moral maxims impossible or very difficult. Having non-passionate inclinations is not morally impermissible. Kant notes that an attempt to extirpate our natural inclinations would even be harmful and blameworthy (*R* 6: 58) – these inclinations on their own do not bring us into a state in which we can barely actualize our capacity for moral self-control. This might be why Kant emphasizes that acquiring inner freedom requires that we be free of passion (*MM* 6: 407).

Kant says the same of affects, but he also explains that passions do greater damage to freedom (*A* 7: 266 f.). Passions hinder moral reasoning in a different way than affects because the former are based on maxims. As Kant points out, they are always connected with reason (*A* 7: 266). However, by using our reasoning ability improperly, we put certain obstacles in the way of its free use by determining our choice by means of the kind of morally incorrect maxims described. In this way, we distort our reflection at its very root, both morally and prudentially, and end up under the dominion of our passions. And passions, as Kant notes, “make all determinability of choice by means of principles [*Grundsätze*] difficult or impossible” (*C3* 5: 272n; translation modified). Moreover, they are mostly “incurable” because “the sick person does not want to be cured and flees from the dominion of principles [*der Herrschaft des Grundsatzes*], by which alone a cure can occur” (*A* 7: 266). In any case, the state of health in which we have control over our faculties can then be regained only with great difficulty.

Having passions also severely hinders *acting* in accordance with moral maxims because it implies having morally incorrect maxims and being strongly motivated to follow them. This need not hold for non-passionate inclinations. For example, Kant thought that the inclination to beneficence “can greatly facilitate

³⁹ See *A* 7: 266.

the effectiveness of *moral* maxims” so long as it does not turn into passion (C2 5: 118; A 7: 267). By ensuring that we are free of passions, we therefore also facilitate the observance of moral maxims.

Self-control, as the capacity for abstraction, plays a crucial role in freedom from passions mainly because we can prevent passions, as the Powalski lecture notes suggest (27: 207), by “nipping them in the bud [*in ihrem Keime erstikken*]”. Taking care that our natural inclinations do not turn into passions involves exercising control over the condition of certain representations.

Kant’s examples of how passions arise illustrate how we can make use of our capacity for *abstraction* in order to prevent passions. He claims, for instance, that the passion for domination stems from a fear of being dominated by others (A 7: 273). To prevent our acquiring this passion, we must avoid basing our desires on feelings of fear; we do this by disregarding certain sensible impressions or by bracketing their influence on our minds. Otherwise, establishing morally correct maxims and having them determine our choices would be impossible. This tells us that we must acknowledge the role of self-control in facilitating the adoption of moral maxims. However, in order to fully understand how we can prevent passions from arising, we must consider how human beings can come to disregard *all* inclinations and corresponding feelings (by abstracting from all sensible impressions). In turning to this question, we will also see more clearly how self-control is directly involved in maxim adoption.

3.2.3 *Self-control as Disregarding All Inclinations and Corresponding Feelings*

Kant also argues that *inner freedom* is the capacity to disregard or to release (*los-machen*) ourselves from “inclinations, so that none of them, not even the dearest, has any influence on a decision [*Entschliebung*] for which we are now to make use of our reason” (C2 5: 161). When it comes to adopting moral maxims, none of our inclinations may influence our way of thinking and making decisions. In this case, we ought to disregard all inclinations.

As empirical desires, *inclinations* are *sensible incentives* through which the object of our desire determines our power of choice (R 6: 21). Kant’s well-known idea is that moral lawgiving does not allow for these incentives: heteronomy results whenever the will lets the object determine our choices, or whenever we let our choices be determined by inclinations and aversions (that is, by “pathological” determining grounds).⁴⁰ In order to make autonomous lawgiving pos-

⁴⁰ See for example C2 5: 93 and MM 6: 219.

sible, we therefore ought to abstract from all sensible impressions or to bracket their influence on our minds, so that in this sense they do not precede our consideration of what our duty is and become our main reason for adopting maxims. Repeated use of our capacity for abstraction makes it possible for us to act as if our inclinations did not exist, although it is impossible for us actually to discard them (e. g. C2 5: 84 and 5: 117).

As Kant explains, we must:

[A]bstract from all objects to this extent: that they have no *influence* at all on the will, so that practical reason (the will) may not merely administer an interest not belonging to it, but may simply show its own commanding authority as supreme lawgiving. (G 4: 441, italics mine)

Similarly, he argues:

[R]eason must not play the part of mere guardian [*den Vormund*] to inclination but, disregarding it altogether [*ohne auf sie Rücksicht zu nehmen*], must attend solely to its own interest as pure practical reason". (C2 5: 118)

For Kant, acting morally is acting not from the *interest of inclination* but from duty, which for us must be a kind of interest or a *rule* by which our desire is connected with a certain feeling.⁴¹ Without this feeling, we cannot be morally motivated. However, a *pure moral interest* is a special kind of interest – it is produced by our judgment on *a priori* grounds, and *taking an interest in the action* involves this kind of judging activity.⁴²

To make a morally worthy action possible, we must take an interest in moral ends, and we do so by adopting maxims of virtue, or maxims of ends.⁴³ As our own reasons for adopting maxims, incentives or subjective determining grounds are crucial in this regard. If we are to become morally motivated to perform an action, we must adopt a maxim of virtue through which the moral law becomes the incentive that actually moves us to perform that action (MM 6: 480).

Furthermore, a maxim of virtue is genuinely moral only insofar as it rests on this *pure interest* in compliance with the moral law (C2 5: 79). The establishment of a pure moral interest is therefore implicit in every particular moral maxim: it is its deep motivating ground, which is to be renewed in different situations.

⁴¹ I do not seek to give a detailed account of Kant's notion of interest here. For valuable discussions of this issue, see Jeanine Grenberg 2001.

⁴² See C3 5: 300.

⁴³ See MM 6: 395.

As I explain (Vujošević 2019, 49; Vujošević 2020, 14), we have reason to claim that this subjective ground of our maxims is our virtuous disposition (*Tugendgesinnung*), which we cultivate through adopting specific moral maxims of virtue. In other words, the adoption of these maxims requires that we continuously renew our general commitment to the moral law by reassessing our own incentives. Were we to adopt them once and for all, we would, as Kant notes, lose “freedom in adopting maxims which distinguishes an action done from duty (*MM* 6:409).⁴⁴

To produce a pure interest by adopting particular moral maxims on this ground, we must make use of our capacity for abstraction. By leading us into a *state of independence* from the influences furnished by our sensible nature, abstraction prevents sensible objects from determining choice. Entering into this state of mind also involves *setting aside* all *feelings* on which our inclinations, as empirical desires, are grounded. Self-control at this stage involves not only preventing affects, but also *disregarding* all feelings that arise differently than moral feeling does. The Kantian duty of apathy thus also demands that we *disregard* all feelings other than this special feeling (*MM* 6: 408). This requires that we enter into a state of independence from the influences of sensible impressions, but not a state of moral indifference in which we lack feelings altogether. Kant even warns against misunderstanding apathy as “subjective indifference [*Gleichgültigkeit*] with respect to objects of choice” (*MM* 6: 408). Moral feeling must be present; as we have seen, it makes the adoption of maxims of virtue possible or facilitates the determination of choice by practical laws.

The proposed reading makes it clear that inner freedom is, or at any rate presupposes, the capacity for self-control which is required for the adoption of maxims of virtue. It also clarifies why Kant treats inner freedom as the condition of the duties of virtue and why he insists that virtue can be based only on “free self-constraint” (*MM* 6: 383; 6: 406).⁴⁵ Defining virtue merely as self-constraint, which need not be grounded in inner freedom, does not suffice to determine its specific nature. Kantian virtue is not about controlling some of our inclinations by means of others; it is about controlling all of our inclinations and capacities by means of *pure* practical reason (*MM* 6: 394–6). Virtue is *self-constraint* in accordance with *moral laws* (*MM* 6: 381).

⁴⁴ In Vujošević 2020, 9–14, I discuss in detail this claim and other related passages regarding virtue and habit. I thereby attempt to indicate why the adoption of maxims of virtue or maxims of ends must be understood as a *process*. In Fahmy 2010, 323 f., Melissa Fahmy argues in a similar way against the view that “the adoption of the obligatory end is a brief event that occurs once”.

⁴⁵ In Engstrom 2002, 304 f., Stephen Engstrom’s rich paper on Kant’s understanding of virtue, he even argues that virtue is the realization of the capacity for inner freedom.

Accordingly, Kant insists that virtue involves adopting moral maxims and argues that it therefore surpasses the fulfilment of the duty of apathy (*MM* 6: 408):

Since virtue is based on inner freedom it contains a positive command to a human being, namely to bring all his capacities and inclinations under his (reason's) control and so to rule over himself [*Herrschaft über sich selbst*], which goes beyond forbidding him to let himself be governed by his feelings and inclinations (the duty of *apathy*); for unless reason holds the reins of government [*die Zügel der Regierung*] in its own hands, his feelings and inclinations play the master over him.

This *self-rule* is the aspect of self-control that virtue involves and that the prevention of passions presupposes (*MM* 6: 407); it consists in disregarding all inclinations, which is *simultaneously* the rule of our reason over itself (and over all other capacities). By holding “the reins of government in its own hands”, or by *governing* our feelings and desires, reason prevents them from mastering us. The governing activity of our mind is not about “administering” the interest of inclination, in which case reason would only govern by deciding which of the inclinations one is to fulfill. By setting aside the influence of sensible impressions, reason *determines* choice “independently of sensory impulses, thus through motives [*Bewegsursachen*] that can only be represented by reason” (*C1* A801/B829). This is what it means to say that reason rules or has authority over inclinations and feelings. *Self-rule* is thus *self-determination* through taking a moral interest in the action – that is, through adopting moral maxims on pure grounds.

This interpretation suggests that the role played by moral self-control, interpreted as the capacity for abstraction, is not merely negative. Some previously explained points about abstraction support this claim. For instance, Kant's idea that abstraction involves attention of a sort that differs from the attention we give to sensible objects is in keeping with his claim that reason “must attend [*besorgen*] solely to its own interest as pure practical reason” (*C2* 5: 118). Abstraction, as a kind of actualized attention, might be seen as this attending, and thus its function does not end once we have forbidden ourselves to be governed by our inclinations.

Finally, on Kant's view, we always seem to need the capacity for abstraction because we must constantly exercise this power in order to avoid falling into a state in which choice is determined by inclination. We can never be completely independent of inclinations and needs in the way that a supreme being is or would be (*C2* 5: 118), but we have a duty to achieve this independence by disregarding the influence of sensible impressions on our minds in ever-new situations. In this way, we acquire an analogue of the self-sufficiency of the supreme being (*C2* 5: 118). Virtue, as Kant portrays it, is on the one hand “always *in progress*” because “considered *objectively*, it is an ideal and unattainable, while yet

constant approximation to it is a duty”; on the other hand, it always “starts from the beginning”, for it “has a *subjective* basis in human nature, which is affected by inclinations because of which virtue can never settle down in peace and quiet with its maxims adopted once and for all” (*MM* 6: 409).⁴⁶ The process of adopting these maxims requires that we continuously exercise our capacity for self-control.

4 Conclusion

As the constitutive basis of virtue, inner freedom is, or at least presupposes, the capacity for moral self-control, which is necessarily involved in the process of adopting maxims of virtue. Unlike juridical lawgiving, the lawgiving characteristic of virtue requires that we exercise our capacity for self-control in order to disregard all inclinations and corresponding feelings. In the absence of self-control at this level, we would perhaps be able to compel ourselves to perform legally correct actions, but we would not be able to compel ourselves to adopt maxims of virtue; determining ourselves to act from duty and the fulfilment of the duties of virtue would be impossible for us. It is because of our capacity for self-control, as our capacity to overcome inner obstacles to morality, that we can acquire more than a theoretical knowledge of a possible determination of choice and actually determine our choices by moral laws by adopting maxims of virtue.

Purely rational beings need not compel themselves in this way, for they always will to act morally; when ascribed to them, autonomy does not seem to involve prescribing maxims. To fully explain the *self-constraint* in which *virtue* consists, Kant must therefore refer to the notion of *autocracy* as the specifically human capacity for self-control, which is meant to solve not only the problem of being tempted not to follow already-adopted maxims but also the problem of being tempted to adopt morally incorrect maxims.

We cannot understand the Kantian capacity for self-control as a kind of tool without which we would not be able to compel ourselves to act as we think we should, whether for moral or other reasons. As we have seen, Kant provides an alternative account on the basis of which we can argue that Sulla is not virtuous, and is even vicious, mainly because he misuses his capacity for moral self-control while *adopting* his *maxims*. Even though he forms his own maxims, Sulla fails to adopt moral maxims and to determine his choice in this way; he cannot be said to exercise free self-constraint. This is why the self-control that he exhibits in

⁴⁶ See also *C2* 5: 33.

disciplining himself to follow his maxims is not moral. As the above analysis of the capacity for *self-control* as *abstraction* shows, these *two levels* of the Kantian capacity for self-control are intimately related, but they are also meant to meet different criteria.

Controlling ourselves at the level of *following* maxims need not require that we disregard all of our inclinations and the feelings on which they are based. Some non-passionate inclinations should even be cultivated because they, as surrogates for the motive of duty, make maxim observation more efficient.

On the other hand, *adopting* moral maxims requires that we disregard all inclinations and corresponding feelings, or that we abstract from all sensible impressions. Passions make the determination of our choices by moral maxims either impossible or very difficult, but they can be avoided only by disregarding the influence of all sensible impressions on our minds, through which *reason constrains itself* in prescribing moral maxims. Self-control, at this level, is not only about facilitating maxim adoption; it is also involved in the very process of adopting the maxims in which the moral law, as an incentive, is incorporated as our main reason for action. As has been shown, this entails the activity of taking an interest in the action. The actualization of our capacity for self-control at this level is actual self-determination, and this is why self-control is central to virtue.⁴⁷

- A *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*
- C *Conflict of the Faculties*
- C1 *Critique of Pure Reason*
- C2 *Critique of Practical Reason*
- C3 *Critique of the Power of Judgment*
- G *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*
- ID *Inaugural Dissertation*
- LA *Lectures on Anthropology*
- LE *Lectures on Ethics*
- LM *Lectures on Metaphysics*
- MM *Metaphysics of Morals*
- P *What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany Since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff?*
- R *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*

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