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The subjective conditions of human morality

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The Relevance of Moral Psychology in Kant's Moral Theory

Try to imagine a moral theory according to which most of our subjective, psychological conditions, such as our instincts, feelings and desires, are obstacles we must overcome if we are to act morally. In this theory, moral agency is broadly conceived as a constant struggle with these psychological obstacles: acting morally requires that we prevent these subjective conditions from motivating us by influencing our way of thinking and judging. Our reason ought to be free from all sensible and personal influences. Only some psychological conditions, such as our cultivated sympathetic feelings, conscience and self-control, may be considered aids to morality, but even these useful, subjective conditions are only mere aids or instruments that help us to perform moral actions. That is, they become useful only once we have judged an action to be morally acceptable and have chosen to perform it. For example, the strength of our capacity for self-control becomes important only once we have decided which particular action we are to perform. Furthermore, these helping conditions cannot motivate us to act morally. For instance, if my motive for performing an action is that morality requires it, this rules out my being motivated by a desire to avoid the unpleasant pangs of conscience that I expect to follow as a consequence of doing the wrong thing. So, even if there is room in this picture for something that could be called *moral* psychology, it does not appear to be truly relevant to the outlined moral theory.

This description provides a sketch of the dominant view of Kant's moral theory and the place of psychology within it. And its prevalence is not without reason. As I explain below, Kant gives us grounds for subscribing to this reconstruction of the relationship between his moral theory and psychology. Yet Kant's texts, as I aim to show in this dissertation, also support a modification of the above picture – one that accommodates the notion that a kind of moral psychology can indeed be found in Kant's works, the relevance of which is not adequately captured by the commonly accepted view. More precisely, I shall be arguing that some of our psychological conditions are more than mere aids or instruments in the performance of morally good actions.

One of Kant's most influential ideas regarding morality, on which the above description rests, is already present in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785).* In laying down the foundation for his metaphysics of morals, Kant there attempts to find and establish the supreme principle of morality. He comes to the conclusion that this principle can only be his famous "categorical imperative", formulated as follows: "*act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*" (G 4: 421).

On Kant's view, this principle differs from all other proffered principles of morality because it is unconditional, objective and therefore universally valid. It does not have something else as its condition, especially not the expectation of personal gain

based on one's needs and inclinations. But the validity of this principle is dependent neither on sympathetic feelings nor on a specific kind of feeling that Kant calls "moral feeling". Like all other feelings, this special feeling cannot be taken as "the standard for our moral appraisal", for "reason alone delivers the objective grounds" (G 4: 460). The basis on which we should determine what our duties are, or "the ground of obligation", as Kant explains, "must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in concepts of pure reason" (G 4: 389). It is only by disregarding all feelings, needs and inclinations – all that is "naturally" given to us – that we can evade the heteronomy characteristic of traditional moral theories.

Correspondingly, in the *Groundwork* Kant argues that the metaphysics of morals should be "completely cleansed of everything that may be only empirical and belongs to anthropology" (4: 389), for it should examine "the idea of principles of a possible *pure* will and not the actions or conditions of human volition generally, which for the most part are drawn from psychology" (4: 390–91).[1] The most charitable interpretation of these passages seems to be: Kant is arguing that a metaphysics of morals should be purified or cleansed of everything that is *merely* empirical, because at any rate it is not *primarily* concerned with our psychological conditions.

But even if we accept this interpretation, we must admit that Kant nonetheless downgrades feelings and inclinations (or empirical desires) in favor of reason, indeed "pure" reason. Moreover, he does not waver from this position in later writings. In his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), for example, Kant points out that inclinations, including our inclination to beneficence, are "always burdensome" to us (C2 5: 118) and that we must release ourselves from them, "so that none of them, not even the dearest, has any influence on a decision for which we are now to make use of our reason" (C2 5: 161). It is only independently of the influence of sensible impressions that our reason can determine what our moral obligations are. Because of this, reason must free itself from all empirical influences.

For Kant, the idea that reason must be "pure" is crucial to explaining not only how we come to know what our duties are but also how we become morally motivated to perform morally correct actions. Kant's well-known view is that mere performance of a morally good action is not all that is morally required of us – we must perform a morally good action for morally acceptable reasons. He thought that it is the motivation behind a morally correct action that makes that action morally worthy. Strictly speaking, if I am to act morally, I cannot be motived by impure incentives. If, for example, I help someone because I want to improve my reputation, then I am actually

1 In the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), Kant seems to advocate a less strict view of the relationship between his metaphysics of morals and anthropology, and importantly, he does so without mentioning psychology (MM 6: 216–7). Cf. MM 6: 385.

moved to perform that action by an inclination to honor, and my action does not have moral worth. The same would hold even if I happened to be motivated by an inclination to help others in need. So, from a Kantian perspective, if I am to become morally motivated to perform an action I must somehow release myself from all contingent or impure sources of motivation. In any case, I must not let them become my primary motives for action.

More specifically, I must take care not to adopt my own principles of acting, or my *maxims*, on the basis of my needs and inclinations. Since I, like every other human being, have a propensity or tendency to give priority to my natural inclinations while adopting maxims, I must compel myself not to do so. It is through adopting a genuinely moral maxim that I make myself morally motived to perform an action.

This point can be further clarified by Kant's late account of how we "incorporate [*aufnehmen*]" incentives into our maxims. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), Kant suggests that we incorporate both the incentive of the moral law and the incentives of inclinations, and that the real question concerns which is given priority (R 6: 36). If we are to be morally motivated we must subordinate the incentives of our inclinations to the incentive of the moral law. That is to say, we ought to incorporate the moral law in its purity, as "the self-sufficient incentive" of the determination of our choice (R 6: 46). By properly ordering our incentives, or "the matter" of our maxim, we give our maxim the form on the basis of which it can be judged as morally good (R 6: 36).

The priority of the form of our maxims is given even greater emphasis in Kant's discussions of how we can test whether our maxims have the form of universal law. The underlying idea is that we can perform a kind of thought experiment to check whether we can simultaneously will a maxim as a universal law, so that we can act as the categorical imperative demands (G 4: 421). This experiment, known as the *universalization* test, has been widely discussed in the secondary literature, and various interpretations of what the test involves have been offered.[2] For our purposes, it is important to note that testing whether our maxims have the *form* of universality is the decisive factor in determining their quality: maxims that pass the test are morally permissible.

At first glance, the above outline of Kant's moral theory does not seem to allow for a relevant *psychology*. With this said, however, Kant did discuss psychological issues throughout his writings. Most such discussions occur in his lectures on metaphysics, but they can also be found, for example, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View.* In the lectures on metaphysics and the first *Critique*, Kant thoroughly addresses what was then called "empirical" and "rational" psychology. That is, he discusses the distinction between the "empirical" and "the rational doctrine of the soul" (e.g. C1 A 342/B 400). In his view, both kinds of psychology have the *soul* as

2 See, for example, Pauline Kleingeld (2017), Oliver Sensen (2014) and Allen Wood (1999).

their object, and the rational one, for this reason, must also be "grounded in part on an empirical principle" (C1 A 342–3/B 400–1). Since "the concept of the soul in itself is a concept of experience", even rational psychology must start by taking this concept from experience (LM 28: 263). Hence, we can claim that on Kant's view psychology is the cognition of the soul as an *empirical* object. As such, it does not seem to be relevant to his moral theory.

Furthermore, Kant states that psychology "is the cognition of the object of our inner sense" and that "I am myself the object of inner sense" (LM 28: 583). He relatedly explains: "**I**, as thinking, am an object of inner sense, and I am called 'soul'" (C1 A 342/B 400). In psychology, "we investigate ourselves according to our ideas of inner sense" (A 7: 134n), and for Kant inner sense is consciousness of what we "undergo" *in time* or *receive* through our "inner intuition" (A 7: 161); it is consciousness of the manifold sensible impressions that impose themselves on our minds in different situations. Taken together, these passages tell us that psychology actually involves cognition of ourselves, or our souls, on the basis of the impressions that we receive in time.[3] Empirical psychology is cognition of how we intuit ourselves through inner sense in different situations – it is cognition of ourselves, as we *appear* to ourselves.[4]

As we have seen, however, the empirical content that we receive though inner sense is precisely what Kant advises us to "cleanse" from the metaphysics of morals in the *Groundwork*. He argues that true moral agency requires that we disregard all feelings and desires grounded in sensible impressions; this is how we are to secure the purity that autonomy requires. If seen only from this perspective, the Kantian moral agent appears to be a kind of ideal spectator who is purely rational and does not have to deal with the problem of applying moral laws in real-life situations.

It is therefore interesting to consider whether there is any relevant moral psychology in Kant's moral theory. I believe that there is and that we have reason to understand his doctrine of virtue as a kind of moral psychology.[5] And of course, his doctrine of virtue is a necessary element of his moral theory.

Kant's explanation of the difference between "pure morality" and the doctrine of virtue is helpful here (C1 A 54–5/B 78–9). He argues that "pure morality" contains "merely the necessary moral laws of a free will in general", whereas "the doctrine of virtue" actually "considers these laws under the hindrances of the feelings, inclinations, and passions to which human beings are more or less subjected" (C1 A 54–5/B 78–9).

3 Cf. A 7: 142.

4 The closest discipline to empirical psychology is Kant's pragmatic anthropology. For further discussion of how they are related, see Patrick Frierson (2014). For a more detailed treatment of Kant's anthropology see, for example, Robert Louden (2000), Patrick Frierson (2003), Alix Cohen (2008) and Thomas Sturm (2011).

5 Kant offers his doctrine of virtue in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), but its important elements can also be found in other works (for example, the *Religion*).

Kant there analogously elucidates the distinction between pure and applied logic. Like "pure morality", pure logic draws nothing from psychology. In applied logic, we make use of the laws of pure logic "*in concreto*, namely, under the contingent conditions of the subject, which can hinder or promote this use, and which can be given only empirically" (C1 A 54/B 78). Importantly, Kant continues by claiming that the doctrine of virtue, like applied logic, "can never yield a true and proven science, since it requires empirical and psychological principles [*Principien*]" (C1 A 55/ B 79). The doctrine of virtue and applied logic can never attain real scientific status: since they also concern our empirical, subjective, and psychological conditions, they must draw from psychology.[6] This suggests that Kant's doctrine of virtue is inextricably linked to empirical psychology: since it concerns the concrete application of moral laws, it must also be about our psychological conditions.

Kant relatedly suggests that a doctrine of virtue is not to be identified with a doctrine of morals (MM 6: 383). Since we acquire virtue as moral strength by properly exercising our capacity to overcome our sensible impulses in ever-new situations (MM 6: 397), a doctrine of virtue must also be about our subjective, psychological conditions – both those which hinder, such as inclinations, and those which help, such as self-control.[7] As Kant admits, every doctrine of virtue "becomes ridiculous if it is decked out in scraps of metaphysics" (MM 6: 376).

But this, as he continues, does not mean that it is useless "to investigate in metaphysics the first grounds of the doctrine of virtue" (MM 6: 376). Even more, in Kant's view, we have "an indispensable duty" to go back to metaphysical "principles [*Grundsätzen*] even in the doctrine of virtue" (MM 6: 377). A proper doctrine of virtue must still be built upon pure grounds – the formal principle of duty must be derived from pure reason. Kant therefore states that the basic or supreme principle of the doctrine of virtue is the categorical imperative: "act in accordance with a maxim of *ends* [*Maxime der Zwecke*] that it can be a universal law for everyone to have" (MM 6: 395).

This statement is not inconsistent with the idea that Kant's doctrine of virtue can be viewed as a kind of moral psychology, or as a kind of doctrine which must also draw something from psychology. Were "the formal principle of duty" (which is constitutive of the categorical imperative) on its own sufficient for a doctrine of virtue, this doctrine would only be a doctrine of morals (MM 6: 389). But what ethics as a doctrine of virtue (MM 6: 381) *adds* to the categorical imperative is that "this principle is to be thought as the law of *your* own will and not of will in general" (MM 6: 389). Additionally, Kant argues that what counts when it comes to duties of virtue "is not merely knowing *what* it is one's duty to do" but "primarily the inner principle of the will [*Princip des Willens*], namely that consciousness of this duty be also the *incentive* [*Triebfeder*] to ac-

6 In his *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (4: 471), Kant also argues that the empirical doctrine of the soul, as "a natural doctrine of inner sense", can never become a science.

7 Cf. MM 6: 375–6.

tions" (MM 6: 376n). We make the categorical imperative the inner principle of our will by adopting particular moral maxims, or by adopting those maxims of ends in accordance with which the categorical imperative demands that we act.

The question is: Are the relevant psychological conditions crucial only to our ability to follow established moral maxims, or are they also required for their adoption?[8] How relevant are these subjective conditions to Kant's moral theory?

Over the past few decades, Kant's moral psychology has received increasing attention.[9] The subjective conditions that make human morality possible, such as conscience, moral feeling and self-control, have been addressed in greater detail.[10] Feelings and inclinations, as subjective human conditions that hinder virtuous action, have also been discussed at length – especially affects and passions.[11] Against the common caricature of the Kantian virtuous agent as someone who must be purely rational or devoid of feelings, it has been shown that certain feelings play a positive role in Kant's moral theory and that they therefore ought to be cultivated.[12]

However, the predominant view still seems to be that our subjective conditions only become relevant once we have adopted moral maxims. Kant's stern stance against impurity, as outlined above, appears to explain the lack of attention given to the role of certain subjective conditions in the adoption of moral maxims.

By analyzing key notions in Kant's moral psychology, such as moral strength (in which virtue consists), self-control, conscience, moral feeling and cultivation, I attempt to show in this dissertation that we should move beyond the claim that Kant's moral psychology is only relevant at the level of following our maxims. I argue that certain subjective conditions are necessary for the adoption of maxims of virtue.

Kant claims that "a maxim of virtue consists precisely in the subjective autonomy of each human being's practical reason and so implies that the law itself [...] must *serve*

8 As will become clear in *Chapter 2*, I hold that there is a distinction between the level of adopting maxims and the level of following them, but that these levels are intimately related.

9 Closer attention has also been paid to the nature of Kant's empirical psychology. In particular, attention has been given to why Kant thought that empirical psychology can never become a real science. See, for instance, Patrick Frierson (2014) and Thomas Sturm (2001).

10 Kant treats conscience and moral feeling as the subjective conditions of our moral receptivity (MM 6: 399–402), and the lecture notes suggest that self-control should also be treated as a subjective condition (LE 27: 360). These conditions have been discussed, for example, by Owen Ware (2014, 2009), Andrea Esser (2013), Dieter Schönecker (2013), Anne Margaret Baxley (2010), Paul Guyer (2010), Jens Timmermann (2006) and Thomas Hill (2002).

11 See for instance: Patrick Frierson (2014), John Hare (2011), Jens Timmermann (2009), Maria Borges (2008), Lara Denis (2006, 2000) and Jeanine Grenberg (2001).

12 See, for instance, Baxley (2010, 2003), Marcia Baron (1995) and Nancy Sherman (1990).

as our incentive" (MM 6: 480; italics mine).[13] If we are to become morally motivated to perform an action, we must adopt a maxim of virtue by which the moral law becomes the incentive that is powerful enough to move us to perform that action. On its own, our awareness of the moral law does not seem to suffice in this regard; we must make the moral law our incentive – one that is by itself sufficient to actually determine our choice. As Kant suggests, without incentives moral laws are only objective, or they are mere grounds of appraisal that are not at the same time "subjectively practical" (LM 28: 317).[14] Without incentives, our maxims would be *mere rules* lacking any power to move us to act morally.[15] Or, since moral laws are "objectively necessitating" for us but not "also at the same time subjectively necessitating", we ought to adopt maxims through which we also make the moral law subjectively "necessitating" (LM 28: 258).[16] By adopting moral maxims of virtue, we make the moral law our own motivationally sufficient incentive. Maxims of virtue are thus self-imposed principles which are efficient in practice; they are those maxims on which we actually act.[17]

Unlike practical laws or imperatives, which are objective practical principles, our moral maxims are *subjective* principles that "merely qualify for a giving of universal law" (MM 6: 389).[18] Since "the maxims of human beings", as Kant notes, are based on "subjective causes [*subjectiven Ursachen*]", they "do not of themselves conform with these objective principles" (MM 6: 214). If these objective principles are to serve us "also subjectively" as practical principles, reason must gain control over the faculty of desire (G 4: 401n). When adopting moral maxims of action, or our own principles of acting, we must also compel ourselves to make the categorical imperative "subjectively practical" for us.

Kant emphasizes that our maxims are *subjective* principles. For example, he states that a maxim is "the subjective principle of volition" (G 4: 401n): "the subjective principle of acting" that "contains the practical rule determined by reason conformably

13 He relatedly argues that an *incentive*, like *a law*, is a necessary element of lawgiving (MM 6: 218) and that "the ground of all practical lawgiving" lies "*objectively in the rule* and the form of universality which makes it fit to be a law", whereas it "*subjectively* […] lies in the *end*" (G 4: 431).

14 When making this point, Kant also uses the terms "objectively necessary" and "subjectively possible" (LM 29: 900). In the second *Critique* (5: 151), he similarly writes about reason's sometimes being "objectively practical" but not also "*subjectively* practical".

15 Cf. MM 6: 393.

16 Kant also suggests that "the practical or also objective, compulsion in a human being" is not "at the same time always subjective" (LM 28: 897).

17 In the secondary literature, these maxims are sometimes described as our particular or more specific maxims. For instance, Henry Allison (1990: 94) writes about "the relatively specific maxims on which agents actually act" (such as "the maxim of false promising") as being different from "more general principles, likewise maxims, that are implicit in the operative maxim".

18 Cf. C2 5: 19. See also C2 5: 27 and 5: 19–20.

with the condition of the subject" (G 4: 420–1n), or a "rule that the agent himself makes his principle on subjective grounds" (MM 6: 225). This emphasis tells us that even a moral maxim, the form of which holds "objectively, i.e., under the idea of a reason having complete control over all subjective moving causes [*subjective Bewegursachen*]" (4: 420n), is a rule that we make for ourselves on "subjective grounds", or on the basis of our own subjective conditions. By definition, maxims are our *subjective volitional* principles.[19] As such, moral maxims become principles of our own will (principles in accordance with which we really act) only if we also gain control over our inclinations in ever-new situations, such that inclinations are prevented from becoming our main incentives. Without proper incorporation of the incentive of the moral law into our maxims, our choice cannot really be determined by this law. This is where, on my interpretation, subjective conditions must come in, not only negatively, as obstacles (mostly our inclinations), but also positively, as the subjective conditions that make it possible for us to adopt moral maxims of virtue (e.g. self-control and conscience). By thoroughly analyzing the latter type of condition, I show that the relevance of Kant's moral psychology has been underestimated.

As implied above, the strength of our capacity for moral self-control appears to be crucial to the adoption of maxims of virtue. I therefore turn to Kant's notion of moral self-control in *Chapter 2*. I then discuss the strength and weakness of our capacity for self-control in *Chapters 3* and *4*, respectively. In *Chapter 5*, I address Kant's conception of conscience. As I shall show, Kant's discussions of these issues cannot be detached from his discussions of how we adopt moral maxims. The main goal of these four chapters is to demonstrate the relevance of Kant's moral psychology to the process of maxim adoption.

In *Chapter 2*, I first examine Kant's notion of moral self-control through the lens of Kant's use of the term "*autocracy*". Spelling out what he means by this term is essential to understanding his conception of *virtue*.[20] According to certain lecture notes, Kant equates autocracy with *moral feeling* (e.g. LE 29: 626). To show that self-control and moral feeling are required for the adoption of moral maxims of virtue, I address the intimate relationship between the concept of self-determination and moral feeling.

To explain how self-control participates in the adoption of moral maxims, I then interpret the Kantian capacity for self-control as *abstraction*, i.e. as our capacity to disregard the manifold sensible impressions that external objects constantly impose on our

19 I do not seek to give a detailed account of Kant's notion of a maxim here. As will become clear in *Chapter 3*, of the eight different interpretations of maxims presented in Rob Gressis's (2010) survey, my view seems to come closest to Onora O'Neill's (1989: 84) understanding of maxims as "underlying principles or intentions".

20 Although some commentators maintain that self-control is central to virtue, providing a thorough analysis of Kant's conception of self-control does not seem to be one of their aims. Consider, for example, Felicitas Munzel's (1999: 14, 165) and Maria Borges's (2008: 62) brief remarks on virtue as self-control.

minds. My analysis of the exercise of this capacity in relation to affects, passions and all other inclinations and feelings reveals that the adoption of moral maxims requires that we disregard all sensible impressions, for it is only in this way that we can ensure the purity of our moral incentives.[21]

The interpretation of self-control as abstraction also offers a plausible proposal for how to understand the relation between the *empirical* perspective and the *pure* perspective in Kant's doctrine of virtue: a proposal according to which these perspectives are not only different but also intertwined, as Kant himself suggests (e.g. MM 6: 418 and A 7: 142).[22] If abstraction is constitutive of self-control, then it involves disregarding or setting aside inclinations and feelings that we naturally have; the best we can do is to continuously disregard the influence of sensible impressions on our minds. Thus we need not claim that the Kantian virtuous agent can or should get rid of his feelings and inclinations. As Kant argues, this is impossible (e.g. C2 5: 84 and 5: 117). Our picture of human nature should be more realistic than that held by the Stoics (R 6: 58n), and thus we need not presuppose that we really can take up the position of God, or the position of a perfectly impartial spectator. Rather, we should strive towards such an ideal by doing our best, in ever-new situations, to incorporate the moral law into our maxims as a *pure*, self-sufficient incentive.

In Chapter 3, I turn to Kant's treatment of moral strength. In my view, *virtue* as *moral strength* is best read as the proper exercise of our capacity for self-control, which is expressed both at the level of adopting moral maxims and at the level of following them. Accordingly, I propose a novel, twofold reading of moral strength according to which we need moral strength to *set* ourselves *moral ends* and to *realize* them. My interpretation of Kant's notion of *cultivation*, mainly understood as the activity of acquiring the strength of self-control by "abstracting from" sensible impressions, helps me to further clarify these two aspects of moral strength.

By highlighting the important link between moral strength and virtuous maxims of ends, I conclude that "the strength of intention [*die Stärke des Vorsatzes*]" (MM 6: 390) that Kant calls virtue must also be the strength of intention by which we, in ever-new situations, set aside all sensible impressions and set ourselves morally

21 It is this aspect of Kant's account of moral self-control that makes it distinct. His view on self-control differs not only from the Humean view according to which calm passions control violent ones but also from a more common view of self-control according to which reason controls passions and feelings. As will become clear, in Kant's account reason must also control itself if one is to properly incorporate the moral law into one's maxims.

22 It is therefore not my aim to explain human action from the empirical perspective (which examines causal interactions between the world and the powers of the human mind) – a perspective taken, for example, by Patrick Frierson (2014) in *Kant's Empirical Psychology*. See also Frierson (2005).

obligatory ends. I believe that virtuous maxims must involve this intention of setting a moral end. This reading captures Kant's insistence that our virtuous maxims must be freely adopted in new situations (e.g. MM 6: 409; C2 5: 32–3).

Additionally, this interpretation of moral strength is a fruitful tool for figuring out how weakness of will is to be understood in the Kantian theoretical framework. As the other side of the same coin, weakness of will must also manifest itself at the level of adopting maxims. In *Chapter 4,* I interpret Kant's conception of *moral weakness* as a mere lack of the two aspects of moral strength – that is, as a mere lack of virtue. On my view, moral weakness is expressed at both intimately related levels of self-control: it involves a failure to realize moral ends and a failure to properly set ourselves moral ends. As one who lacks moral strength to set himself particular moral ends, the morally weak agent may then also be said to fail to adopt moral maxims of virtue, or the maxims that actually guide his actions.

Finally, Kant's texts suggest that *conscience*, as one of the four subjective conditions of moral receptivity, is also involved in the adoption of moral maxims, yet the intimate relationship between conscience and the adoption of moral maxims is largely neglected in the secondary literature.[23] By discussing the nature and multiple functions of conscience, I deal with this issue in *Chapter 5*. On my view, Kantian conscience is *moral self-appraisal* – by approving and disapproving incentives, it enables us to adopt moral maxims.

If this picture is correct, then conscience and moral self-control make virtuous or morally worthy actions possible by being necessary not only for the mere observation of already adopted moral maxims but also for their adoption.

1.2 The Relevance of Kant's Conception of Conscience to Contemporary Moral Psychology

Basic concepts of Kant's moral psychology may also serve as a solid theoretical basis for addressing contemporary issues concerning moral psychology. In *Chapter 6*, I show that Kant's conception of conscience is philosophically rewarding when it is used to account for the moral incompetence characteristic of psychopaths. Expanding upon Kant's notion of conscience, I not only offer an empirically supported account of the immorality of the psychopath but also introduce a new way to defend rationalism in the the current debate as to whether the immorality of the psychopath supports sentimentalism alone.

23 To my knowledge, only Paul Guyer (2010: 144) and Jens Timmermann (2006: 303–304) touch upon this issue.

A psychopath is described as an individual who lacks a conscience. Naturally, our understanding of what makes a person without a conscience morally incompetent depends significantly on how we conceive of conscience. One of the leading experts on psychopathy, Robert Hare, grounds his description of the psychopath's lack of conscience on what he believes to be a common view:

> Socialization also contributes to the formation of what most people call their conscience, the pesky inner voice that helps us to resist temptation and to feel guilty when we don't. Together, this inner voice and the internalized norms and rules of society act as an "inner policeman" regulating our behaviour even in the absence of the many *external* controls, such as laws, our perceptions of what others expect from us, and real-live policemen. (Hare 1993: 75)

On this view, conscience is the inner guiding voice which, together with internalized norms, makes up the mechanism of internal control. It remains unclear what this inner voice is, how it distinguishes right from wrong, and its relation to the internalization of norms. In order to explain the moral incompetence of psychopaths, we need a more precise clarification of these points, as well as a more detailed account of the link between lack of guilt and lack of conscience. In a word, we need a developed theory of conscience.

The issue of conscience is neglected in the literature on moral psychology, however. In all three volumes of *Moral Psychology*, edited by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, conscience is mentioned only in passing. Even when philosophers involved in the rationalism-sentimentalism debate regarding psychopathy discuss feelings of guilt, they typically do so without mentioning conscience.

There are, of course, exceptions, for example the emotional consciousness theory of conscience recently developed by Paul Thagard and Tracy Finn (2011).[24] On their view, conscience is "the internal sense of moral goodness or badness" and a sort of "moral intuition, which is a kind of emotional consciousness" (Thagard & Finn, 2011: 150, 168). They also suggest that moral intuitions are "the products of conscience" and that psychopaths lack them (Thagard & Finn, 2011: 150, 158). This might explain why psychopaths are not able to distinguish right from wrong, at least intuitively, and why they are not motivated to act morally.

Kant's conception of conscience is significantly different: conscience is neither the ultimate source of knowledge of right and wrong nor a kind of moral intuition.

24 The other exception of which I am aware is William Lyons's (2009) account of conscience, which centres on his understanding of personal identity.

Rather, conscience presupposes general moral knowledge. In Kant's opinion, we are incapable of knowing via our feelings whether a particular action is morally right or wrong. Even more, Kantian conscience, as I shall argue, is not to be identified with any kind of feeling or emotion, including the self-evaluative feeling of guilt.

On my interpretation, Kantian conscience is moral self-appraisal that triggers certain emotional responses. Although it is meant to presuppose general moral knowledge, its function is not to apply this knowledge to particular cases (as was maintained, for example, by Thomas Aquinas).[25] As I shall clarify with reference to Alexander Baumgarten's similar definition of conscience, this function does not seem to suffice when it comes to determining whether an agent has actually done his best to avoid adopting morally incorrect principles of acting. This, as we will see, is what the judgments of Kantian conscience concern. As such, conscience plays an inescapable role in self-cognition and the self-attribution of blameworthy or blameless actions.

An account based on this conception can explain the psychopath's moral failing by appealing to the symptoms of psychopathy that are established by clinical observations and empirical studies. First, such an account can easily accommodate the link between psychopaths' unrealistic self-assessments and their lack of guilt. Second, it can account for psychopaths' failure to accept responsibility and for their insensitivity to moral considerations. Third, it can explain why psychopaths fail to make genuine, first-person moral judgments in real-life situations, even though, according to some studies, they theoretically still seem to know right from wrong.

Finally, my Kantian account of conscience reveals a specific rational deficit associated with psychopaths which has been overlooked in the contemporary debate between rationalists and sentimentalists. As I elaborate in *Chapter 6*, by paying closer attention to psychopaths' impaired moral self-reflection, this account provides a novel explanation of psychopaths' moral incompetence that rationalists can use to defend their position against the objections raised by sentimentalists.

25 See, for example, Richard Sorabji (2014: 3, 13, 122–23).