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The subjective conditions of human morality

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Concluding Considerations

The preceding chapters shed new light on the relevance of Kant's moral psychology – mainly within his own moral theory, but also to contemporary moral psychology. In most of these chapters, I buttress the relevance of Kant's moral psychology by showing that certain subjective conditions of human morality are also required for the adoption of moral maxims of virtue, or the specific moral maxims on which we really act.

Along the way, I have set forth a fuller account of Kant's conception of virtue. According to this account, virtue as moral strength is the proper exercise of our capacity for moral self-control at two intimately related levels. Moreover, I have shown that moral strength can also be read as an exercise of the capacity for self-control that is needed if we are to freely adopt moral maxims in ever new situations, and that moral weakness can therefore also be read as a mere lack of moral strength expressed at the level of maxim adoption. As I have explained, a similar picture holds for the Kantian conscience: it is necessary not only for the evaluation of our own actions but also for our approval or disapproval of the incentives on which we have based (or will base) our maxims.

Self-control and conscience are necessary conditions of our compelling ourselves to adopt moral maxims and to act accordingly: they presuppose awareness of the moral law and make possible the actual determination of our choices by the moral law. Since the moral law is always an imperative for us, these subjective conditions must be in place if we are to make the moral law “at the same time subjectively necessitating” or “subjectively practical” (LM 28: 258; 28: 317). If these conditions were absent, moral imperatives, as objective principles, would not also serve us subjectively as practical principles. It is therefore also due to the proper exercise of our capacities for self-control and conscience that we can adopt virtuous maxims (our subjective, volitional principles of action). As with self-control regarding passions and affects, the self-reflective, monitoring activity of conscience can be said to facilitate the adoption of moral maxims.¹

But how are we then to distinguish between Kant's conceptions of self-control and conscience? How are we to understand the relationship between these two subjective conditions, each of which is necessary when it comes to compelling ourselves to adopt moral maxims? Here is my brief proposal: by properly exercising our capacity for self-control we set ourselves moral ends in ever-new situations, whereas conscience facilitates this process of setting ourselves moral ends. Conscience seems to enable this process because it stimulates moral feeling, by which we set ourselves particular moral ends and actually determine our choices by the moral law. As we have seen, it is also due to a well-functioning conscience that we adopt virtuous maxims of ends. Self-control therefore presupposes the self-reflective activity of conscience.

¹ As we have seen, conscience is also necessary when it comes to evaluating already-adopted maxims, but its function in the process of maxim adoption is more important for our present purposes.

Neither self-control nor conscience is sufficient for adopting moral maxims. Moreover, self-control conditions the adoption of moral maxims differently than conscience does. Whereas conscience warns us that it would be impermissible to let our inclinations determine our choices by adopting morally incorrect maxims, via the proper exercise of our capacity for self-control we set aside or disregard the influence of sensible impressions – in the first instance, simply in order to prevent affects and passions. What is more, by disregarding the influences of all sensible impressions on our minds or by abstracting from them, reason controls itself while adopting moral maxims. Self-control at this level is not only a kind of preparatory work that makes maxim-adoption possible but is also directly involved in the adoption of moral maxims.

Accordingly, Kant's point seems to be that the fulfilment of duties of virtue requires not only that we properly exercise our capacity for conscience but also that we properly exercise our capacity for self-control. The latter makes it possible for us to acquire *inner freedom*, which is “the condition of all duties of virtue” (MM 6: 406). The activities of conscience, by which we do not actually set aside sensible influences, do not suffice for us to actually determine ourselves to act “from duty”.

Finally, analysis of how these subjective conditions relate to Kant's idea of *purity* allows us to appreciate not only the full relevance of Kant's moral psychology but also the distinct character of Kant's conceptions of self-control, moral strength and moral weakness. In particular, it allows us fully to appreciate the novel aspects of these elements of Kantian psychology. In the absence of this analysis, we might be tempted to apply the Aristotelian model of continence to account for Kant's concepts of moral strength and weakness. To the extent that we fail to take into account Kant's idea of purity, we might indeed be tempted to read Kant's accounts of moral strength and weakness (of the capacity for self-control) in terms of whether or not one is able to compel oneself to perform an action that one judges to be morally necessary and has chosen independently of one's capacity for self-control. This move is unacceptable for several reasons, however. For one, it reduces Kant's notion of virtue to a kind of skill needed for following already-established maxims, such that we must then account for the fulfilment of duties of virtue in the way that the fulfilment of duties of right can and should be accounted for. By claiming that virtue as moral strength is simply about compelling ourselves to undertake certain actions in order to adhere to our established maxims, we lose a useful tool for explaining the essence of Kantian virtue. In other words, we put ourselves in a position of being unable to explain how we compel ourselves to adopt virtuous maxims of ends.

More generally, in taking this route we also lose the opportunity to apply Kant's distinct conceptions to contemporary issues in moral psychology. As demonstrated above, Kant's view of conscience is philosophically fruitful when applied to present-day debates on the immorality of psychopaths. Kant's conception of self-control, along with its strength and weakness, seems to have similar potential. Analysing self-control as the Kantian ability to abstract from different sensible influences sheds new light on the ongoing dispute over how self-control and weakness of will are to be understood. It remains to be seen whether this approach to self-control will prove as advantageous as my interpretation of Kantian conscience.

