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The subjective conditions of human morality

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Summary

Perhaps surprisingly, Kant's moral theory contains a truly relevant moral psychology. At base, its relevance lies in the fact that Kant took certain psychological conditions to be necessary not only for the observation of moral maxims of virtue but also for their adoption. This is what I primarily aim to show in this dissertation. In addition, I attempt to show that Kant's moral psychology, if understood as I propose, is also relevant to contemporary moral psychology. I do so by demonstrating the fruitfulness of Kant's theory of conscience when it comes to explaining the moral incompetence of psychopaths.

In *Chapter 1*, I introduce the main topic of the dissertation (which is the focus of the first five chapters) by sketching the standard picture of Kant's moral theory and the place of psychology within it. On this picture, most of our subjective, psychological conditions are obstacles to morality, and only some are aids; however, even the latter are mere instruments in the performance of moral actions on the basis of our adopted maxims. This picture therefore seems to leave no room for a truly relevant moral psychology. To explain why this picture is nonetheless largely justified, I go on to outline the contrast between certain basic ideas in Kant's moral theory, which hinge on the necessary purity of reason, and his discussions of psychology, which must be concerned in part with empirical content. Although the very foundation of Kant's moral theory requires that we disregard or set aside the influence of all sensible impressions, his psychology concerns these impressions.

As I argue, however, we have reason to modify the above picture so as to accommodate the point that a kind of moral psychology can be found in Kant's works – one that is also relevant to the adoption of moral maxims. More specifically, I argue that Kant's doctrine of virtue can be understood as a moral psychology; although it must be built upon pure grounds, it has deep connections with empirical psychology. Additionally, I will show that some of our psychological conditions, such as self-control and conscience, are more than mere instruments and are instead necessary for the adoption of moral maxims of virtue, or the moral maxims that actually motivate us to perform morally good actions.

With this sketch in hand, I then provide a brief introduction to the sixth chapter, setting the scene for my examination of psychopaths' moral incompetence through the lens of a Kantian theory of conscience.

In *Chapter 2*, I address Kant's conception of *moral self-control*. The role of self-control in adopting moral maxims has been neglected in the secondary literature. I believe that this role must be explained if we are to capture the distinctive aspect of Kant's conception of moral self-control and properly account for its relevance to his notion of virtue. For this reason, I aim to provide a fuller account by analyzing the different terms used by Kant when explaining the phenomenon of moral self-control, such as self-control (*Selbstbeherrschung*), rule (*Herrschaft*), government (*Regierung*), "free self-constraint" and autocracy.

I first turn to Kant's use of the term "*autocracy*". Spelling out Kant's understanding of autocracy is essential to understanding his conception of *virtue*. With the passage on autocracy from the *Metaphysics of Morals* (6: 383) as my starting point, I analyze autocracy as a specific quality of the human will without which one cannot become virtuous. In order to show that Kant's discussions of autocracy also suggest that self-control is required for the adoption of moral maxims of virtue, I then compare my approach with two well-established accounts of the difference between autocracy and autonomy. I first address Henry Allison's interpretation, according to which autonomy and autocracy are two different aspects of the same power. I then discuss Anne Margaret Baxley's interpretation, according to which two different capacities are in question: whereas autonomy is a legislative power, autocracy is the executive power of the will, required only for compliance with self-legislated principles. By pointing to the difficulties faced by Allison's influential interpretation and by arguing against Baxley's interpretation, I conclude that the relevance of the Kantian capacity for self-control must reach deeper than our ability to follow established maxims.

In order to explain how the proper exercise of our capacity for self-control enables the adoption of maxims of virtue, I then approach self-control from another angle and focus on Kant's discussions of inner freedom as the condition of becoming virtuous. In particular, I analyze the Kantian capacity for self-control as our ability to "abstract from" various sensible impressions by disregarding their influence on our minds, and I discuss its multiple functions, by which we acquire inner freedom. I analyze the exercise of the capacity for self-control in relation to *affects*, then to *passions*, and lastly to all other inclinations and feelings on which they are based. My analysis shows that the use of this capacity to prevent affects and passions, which would suffice for following moral maxims, serves as a kind of preparatory ground for their adoption, whereas the very adoption of moral maxims also requires that we disregard all sensible impressions. On this basis, I conclude that Kant's conception of moral self-control necessarily involves two intimately related levels that are governed by different criteria, and that moral self-control, when understood in this way, is central to virtue.

Expanding on this interpretation, in *Chapter 3* I offer a novel account of Kant's conception of *moral strength*. On my view, *virtue* as moral strength is best read as the proper exercise of our capacity for self-control expressed both at the level of adopting moral maxims and at the level of following them. Accordingly, I propose a twofold reading of moral strength according to which we need moral strength both to set ourselves moral ends and to realize them.

Interpretations of moral strength are often based on the assumption that we only need moral strength when it comes to acting in accordance with adopted maxims, and even those interpretations that are not based on this assumption can be challenged. All available interpretations, then, seem to fail to do justice to Kant's observation that virtue, as the moral strength of the human will, can never become a mere habit, because its maxims must always be freely adopted. As I explain, the *active* and *dynamic* aspect of the adoption of moral maxims of virtue remains unappreciated.

I then offer a twofold account of moral strength, which captures the active and dynamic aspect of Kantian moral strength. On my interpretation, moral strength comes into play not only after we have adopted our moral maxims but also in the very process of adopting them. By building on Kant's claim that moral strength is strength of intention (*Vorsatz*) and strength in acting (*That*) (NMM 23: 394), I address these two aspects of moral strength. I contend that strength of intention, which is essential to Kantian virtue, cannot be a mere intention to follow our maxims, for it must also be an intention by which we set ourselves moral ends in ever-new situations. By strength in acting, I mean mere consistency in performing actions by which we adhere to our moral maxims. This aspect of moral strength is necessary for the realization of moral ends.

To clarify the role of moral strength in bridging the gap between maxim and deed, I address Kant's notion of *cultivation*. I argue that it is by cultivating our capacities that we take care to act in accordance with our moral maxims. On my interpretation, cultivation involves the proper use of our capacity for self-control. By paying closer attention to the cultivation of our capacity for feelings, I show that it makes sense to interpret Kant's notion of cultivation as the activity of acquiring the strength of self-control by "abstracting from" sensible impressions. Additionally, I argue that this interpretation enables us to consistently claim that the cultivation of our feelings can in a certain sense also be involved in the process of adopting virtuous maxims of ends. In this way, I highlight the point of intersection of the two faces of moral strength.

I then turn to the strength of *intention* that Kant calls virtue (MM 6: 390). By analyzing some of Kant's passages on virtue as moral strength and the adoption of maxims of virtue, I first explain why I hold that this intention cannot be read simply as a firm intention to consistently perform actions in accordance with already-adopted maxims. The connection between the strength of intention characteristic of virtue and the idea of setting ourselves moral ends has been neglected in the secondary literature. By highlighting this connection, I specify the nature of this intention. On my reading,

it must also be the intention of a particular *moral end* that motivates us to perform a morally good action. As such, this intention is a constitutive feature of our moral maxims of virtue (or maxims of ends). Insofar as these maxims are to guide our actions in practice, they must involve this kind of intention. Otherwise, we would not be morally motivated to perform certain actions – i.e. motivated by the “pure” moral incentive. I therefore conclude that acquiring moral strength via the proper exercise of the capacity for self-control can be conceived as a necessary activity by which we purify the subjective motivating ground of our particular maxims.

In *Chapter 4*, I turn to the other side of the same coin – *moral weakness*, or mere lack of virtue. Kant’s brief treatment of moral weakness is puzzling. On the one hand, Kant seems to suggest that moral weakness is merely expressed at the level of following maxims. On the other hand, he addresses moral weakness as the first grade of our propensity to evil, which implies that moral weakness must also be expressed at the level of maxim adoption. The question is how these two aspects are to be combined. Additionally, it has been argued that what we usually call weakness of will is incompatible with Allison’s incorporation thesis. Finally, very few (if any) of the available solutions to this puzzle are based on Kant’s notion of moral strength, in which virtue consists.

I first consider a cluster of paradigmatic interpretations and point to the problems they face. The inner conflict experienced by the morally weak agent is often conceived as a conflict between his morally incorrect particular maxims and his good underlying maxim. As I argue, however, the idea that the weak agent adopts the same particular maxims as the vicious and that he has a morally good disposition is not in line with important pieces of textual evidence. Moreover, the relationship between the abovementioned aspects of moral weakness remains unclear, and a satisfying account of the nature of the maxims of the morally weak has yet to be offered.

Drawing on my interpretation of virtue as moral strength, I go on to propose a reading that consistently unifies both aspects. My analysis of moral weakness as a mere lack of the strength necessary for setting ourselves particular moral ends and realizing them also helps us to see what is going wrong at the level of maxim adoption when it comes to the morally weak. It can accommodate both Kant’s suggestion that moral weakness is a failure to follow our moral maxims and the fact that he treats moral weakness as the first stage of evil.

My account consists of three parts. In the first part, I clarify my interpretation of Kant’s notions of “weakness of heart” and “frailty”. In the second part, I claim that moral weakness involves a failure to adhere to our maxims, and I elaborate on lack of self-control at this level. In so doing, I analyze in detail the oft-discussed relation between weakness and affects. This analysis shows that affects can also be viewed as obstacles to the adoption of moral maxims and that Kant’s treatment of affects can be regarded as one of the aspects of his conception of moral weakness (even though it does not exhaust the scope of moral weakness).

In the third part of that section, I discuss how moral weakness is expressed at the level of maxim adoption. By addressing the neglected connection between weakness, moral strength, moral feeling and the activity of setting ourselves moral ends, I try to describe what precisely goes wrong at the level of maxim adoption when it comes to the morally weak (as opposed to what happens with the impure and the vicious). On my interpretation, the morally weak agent lacks the moral strength he should have acquired via the continuous exercise of the power of self-control. His intention to do what the moral law requires is overly general: it does not set a particular moral end, which is what adopting moral maxims of virtue requires. This is why his commitment to the moral law is not fully genuine. His maxims remain weak or ineffective in practice. When incorporating his incentives into his maxims, he still gives priority to sensible incentives, but not in the way that the impure and the vicious do. I argue that the inner conflict experienced by the morally weak is therefore better described as follows: *in abstracto*, one who is morally weak has the will to do what the moral law requires; *in concreto*, however, he does not make an effort to *strengthen* his general moral intention by setting himself moral ends in ever-new situations.

Finally, I clarify how my interpretation unifies two aspects of Kantian moral weakness without necessitating that we abandon the incorporation thesis in order to save the phenomenon of weakness of the will, and without compelling us to claim that the weak-willed agent simply changes his mind.

Chapter 5 deals with Kant's conception of *conscience*. Even when closer attention is paid to this conception, it is often addressed incompletely. The available secondary literature does not seem to explain how Kant's various treatments of conscience can be combined into a consistent whole. The nature of Kantian conscience therefore remains elusive. My goal is to achieve a fuller understanding of Kant's general position on conscience.

With an eye to clarifying the meaning and function of conscience in Kant's works, I first specify the source of the difficulty of reconciling some of his points regarding conscience. Kantian conscience can be understood in several ways: as an "aesthetic" predisposition, as an intellectual predisposition, or as a predisposition that is both "aesthetic" and intellectual. And indeed, Kant does not make the choice between these options easy. As I explain, most Kant scholars assume that Kantian conscience has both aspects. I question this assumption, as well as the claim that conscience is only a feeling.

By discussing the relationship between Kantian conscience and the special moral sense and self-evaluative feelings of guilt and relief, I then explain why the former should neither be understood as a kind of special moral sense nor identified with self-evaluative feelings. My point is that Kantian conscience is instead a kind of moral self-appraisal that triggers certain feelings.

For more decisive textual evidence against the claim that conscience is both affective and intellectual, however, we must turn to the section in which Kant discusses the

four “aesthetic, subjective conditions” of moral receptivity (MM 6: 399). My argument on this point can be summarized as follows: conscience, as an aesthetic condition, can make us susceptible to receiving or experiencing constraints of reason without necessarily being a mode of feeling. As an *intellectual* (rather than emotional) predisposition, conscience is one of the four subjective conditions associated with receptiveness to the concept of duty: this is why it differs from the other three conditions discussed by Kant.

I then provide an analysis of the functions of conscience, understood as a specific manifestation of practical reason. On my reading, conscience is moral self-appraisal, or “the internal judge” whose verdict triggers certain emotional reactions. When Kantian conscience is read as this inner judge, its multiple functions come fully to light: we need conscience to cognize ourselves, to appraise the moral worth of our own character and actions, to impute actions to ourselves, to facilitate and monitor the process of maxim adoption, and to move us to moral actions. With regard to the latter two functions, I note that it is because of the self-reflective, monitoring activity of conscience that we can remove obstacles to adopting moral maxims, and that conscience participates in the process of moral motivation without itself being a moral motive.

In *Chapter 6*, I expand on this account of conscience while developing a theoretical framework for examining whether the moral flaws characteristic of individuals with psychopathy are traceable to their dysfunctional consciences. On my account, stating that psychopathic individuals have such consciences means that their reflective capacity for moral self-assessment, which triggers self-evaluative emotions, is significantly impaired. Furthermore, their moral flaws are traceable to this impairment because it affects their competence in judging moral issues and in being motivated to act morally. My aim is to show that conscience, when understood along the lines I suggest, proves a fruitful tool for explaining the moral incompetence characteristic of those with psychopathy.

Having outlined the Kantian conception of conscience, I go on to show that this conception is in line with the empirical evidence. Psychopaths are well known for their unrealistic self-assessments and absence of guilt. Furthermore, some studies can be taken to suggest that their consistent failure to experience feelings of guilt can also lie in their dysfunctional consciences, conceived as the capacity by which we connect unpleasant feelings to our misdeeds (either committed or merely contemplated). Accordingly, I argue that an account based on Kant’s theory of conscience can accommodate the link between psychopaths’ unrealistic self-assessments and their lack of guilt.

With reference to the empirical and theoretical literature on psychopathy, I then consider the role played by this rational deficit in explaining the incompetence shared by those with psychopathy when it comes to judging moral issues. I demonstrate how such an account can explain both their inability to accept responsibility and their in-

sensitivity to moral considerations. On this basis, I conclude that their underdeveloped capacity for moral self-assessment can explain why they do not make genuine moral judgements and why they are morally indifferent.

I then highlight how focusing on this specific rational deficit significantly affects the status of rationalism within the contemporary dispute as to whether psychopathy supports sentimentalism alone. The Kantian model for understanding conscience provides a novel rationalist account of the moral incompetence of individuals with psychopathy. Closer attention to psychopaths' impaired moral self-reflection thus provides rationalists with a new tool for defending their position against objections raised by sentimentalists. A telling example is Shaun Nichols's (2002) criticism. He claims that rationalists fail to explain what kind of rational capacity underlies the capacity for making the moral/conventional distinction. On his view, rationalists also fail to determine the cognitive mechanism that psychopaths lack, or the mechanism that is needed for the correlation between moral judgement and moral motivation. Nichols argues against rationalist attempts to provide these explanations in terms of the ability to take perspective, general rational ability, or the idea that psychopaths simply need to be convinced of the claims of morality. By appealing to the Kantian conception of conscience, I reply to Nichols's arguments and demonstrate how rationalists can account for this cognitive mechanism. In my opinion, this mechanism is Kantian conscience.

Finally, I bring together the threads of the above discussions by indicating why some of our subjective, psychological conditions, such as self-control and conscience, are truly relevant to Kant's moral theory: questions about the subjective conditions we must develop if we are to adopt maxims of virtue should be central to his doctrine of virtue. Additionally, I sketch my view of the relationship between self-control and conscience. I then note that a thorough analysis of these subjective conditions provides us with the opportunity to apply Kant's distinct conceptions to contemporary issues in moral psychology.

